

COBALT-SERIES

今野緒雪

ハロー グッバイ

マリア様がみてる

集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 33

Written by:

Oyuki Konno

Illustrated by:

Reine Hibiki

Translated by:

Baka-Tsuki

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Each day starts with an exchange of ‘Gokigenyou’ for ‘Good Morning’.

The concerned ‘Gokigenyou’ that inquires ‘How are you?’ is met with the response of ‘Gokigenyou’ that indicates ‘I’m fine’.

And also,

The time between the ‘Gokigenyou’ of ‘Hello’ and the ‘Gokigenyou’ of ‘Goodbye’ is packed full with precious memories.

That’s why it isn’t just a farewell.

So smile.

Wave.

– Okay?

Today's Goal

Part 1.

She had been worried about her swollen eyelids, but after a good night's rest they had become much less conspicuous.

She didn't know whether it was because she had cooled her face with a damp towel as soon as she got home, or the result of improved blood flow from her relaxing bath, or simply due to the passage of time. Either way, the swelling had gone down and she was saved.

Swelling on such a swell occasion – it was a pun, but she couldn't bring herself to smile.

But today she would have to smile.

Her usual, full-face smile had yet to appear, but a tear-stained face was forbidden.

Because today was the day of the graduation ceremony. The day her onee-sama would depart.

Yumi turned towards the bathroom mirror and forced a smile. It's okay, you won't cry. This was why, yesterday evening, she had embraced her onee-sama and they had wept until they could cry no more. The tank that held her tears had been completely drained, so now not a single drop would come out.

Consequently, Yumi's parents had been quite worried about her.

Although she had stopped crying by the time she arrived home, her eyes and nose were still bright red. Her parents panicked when they saw their daughter in such a state, asking her what had happened. Her seemingly naïve brother had been frozen to the spot from shock.

Even so, everyone had understood after she fully explained what had happened, because they knew how strong the bonds were between Yumi and her onee-sama.

“Is Sachiko-san’s onee-san going?”

As Yumi lightly slapped her cheeks with both hands in order to psych herself up, Yuuki walked into the bathroom.

“To the graduation ceremony?”

Instead of turning around, Yumi looked at her brother’s face in the mirror as she answered.

“Why would Youko-sama be going?”

“... You’re right. Normally she wouldn’t.”

So that means.

“Huh? So at Hanadera, there’s a tradition of going to your junior’s graduation ceremony?”

The school that Yuuki attended, Hanadera Academy, were having their graduation ceremony tomorrow.

“I wouldn’t call it a tradition. More like an exception? I’ve heard this year’s graduation students really wanted their seniors to come along.”

That was all Yumi needed to hear for that person’s face to be spotlighted in her mind.

“...When you said seniors, you meant Kashiwagi-san?”

“Well, yeah.”

Yuuki’s expression seemed to contain a mix of tedium and frustration as he answered. It seemed, as the current student council president, he had

conflicting emotions about the current students still longing for the charismatic former student council president.

But, Kashiwagi-san? Come to think of it, he helped out at the Hanadera school festival after being asked to. Even wearing a panda suit and handing out lollipops.

She was smiling at the memory when Yuuki suddenly interrupted her to ask:

“Yumi, what happened between you and Kashiwagi-sempai?”

“Nothing? Why do you ask?”

She had argued back and forth with him about Sachiko-sama and Touko (and they were both Kashiwagi-san’s cousins), but she wouldn’t point to those as something that happened between them – so there was nothing to say.

“...He said that he and you were dating, Yumi.”

“Hmmm.”

Kashiwagi-san was probably kidding around when he said that. He should be more careful with what he says, as there will always be someone like Yuuki who takes what is said jokingly as the truth. Well, Yumi did consult with him about Touko and consequently felt obligated to give him a full report after they became soeurs, but she wouldn’t call that a date. – Definitely not.

“More importantly.”

Yumi turned around.

“It’s not ‘Sachiko-san,’ it’s ‘Sachiko-sama.’ You said it a while ago, but I’m not going to let it slide.”

Yumi advanced on him, with one finger raised, when he seemed to collapse, slumping his shoulders.

“More importantly, huh. I’m starting to feel sorry for him.”

“See, even you say nonsensical things from time to time, Yuuki.”

Why would telling Yuuki to call Sachiko-sama ‘Sachiko-sama’ make him feel sorry for Kashiwagi-san?

Yuuki shook his head, said ‘It’s okay if you don’t understand,’ and wedged himself in front of the mirror.

“Hold on, what are you doing?”

“If you’re done, I’ll take your place.”

“Ahh, wait. I haven’t done my ribbons yet.”

Elbowing him out of the way, Yumi returned to her place in front of the mirror.

“Huh? What have you been doing in here for all this time then?”

She’d been having a staring contest with herself in the mirror, but she couldn’t really say that.

“I said wait, okay. Just one more minute.”

“Oh, forgive me for being in such a rush in the morning. Can’t you do that in your own room?”

“I’m almost done, so just let me get on with it.”

Yumi hastily took out her ribbons, then damn Yuuki said:

“Alright. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven.”

Laughing as he started the countdown. Having said ‘one more minute,’ Yumi would have to move from her position when the countdown reached zero.

“Eeeee.”

Hurried along by the second-by-second updates from her brother, Yumi tightly tied the red satin ribbons atop the hair ties on the left and right sides of her head.

Then she turned back to the mirror for one last confirmation. Today’s goal – no major crying episodes.

Yumi had often heard that you shouldn’t set your goals unreasonably high, so she thought that her target for today was about right. If she had thoughtlessly set a goal like, ‘I won’t shed a single tear today,’ then her hard work could be undone in an instant, if the moment took her. So she would try to keep her crying to a minimum.

“All done.”

Having finished arranging her ribbons into shape, Yumi stepped away from the mirror. There were still seven seconds remaining in the minute she had been given by Yuuki.

Part 2.

Yumi was on her way out the door, having picked up her bag and called out ‘I’m off’ when her mother responded with ‘Wait Yumi-chan’ and came running up to her.

“I’ve already got my tissues.”

In other words, Yumi was saying that she wasn’t a child anymore. ‘That’s not it,’ her mother said as Yumi turned to face her.

“Huh?”

“But first of all, face away from me.”

Having just turned to face her mother, Yumi's shoulders were grabbed by her mother and she was turned back around. Something that she couldn't quite see and didn't understand was making her feel nervous. Turning only her head, Yumi peeked at what was happening and saw her mother holding something in her left and right hands, and striking them together.

"What's that?"

"Flint and steel. You don't know the Shinto fire-purification ceremony? These are cleansing sparks."

Her mother opened her hands, showing her what appeared to be a rock and a piece of metal.

"Geeze, it's like a scene from a historical drama."

Right, right, like when the chief constable says to his wife, 'I'm going out,' and then there's the click-clack as she does this.

By striking the flint against the steel, sparks would appear. According to the Shinto religion these would have a purifying effect, so it was something that actors or salesmen would have done to them before going to work, or travelers would use to pray for a safe journey. Well, at least now Yumi understood their purpose and how they were used. She understood, but –

"Why do we have these things in our house?"

It was a simple question. After all, her father did run a small architectural firm, but you'd hardly call him a salesman. In her seventeen years as a daughter in this household, Yumi had never before seen her parents hold a single fire-purification ceremony.

"Originally they came from your father's parents' house. But I remembered we had them in the storeroom, so I went and looked for them the other day."

"Why?..."

The first answer had just raised the fresh question of why her mother went to the trouble of finding and using them.

“When I saw you heading off to school on the day of the student council elections, I felt like I had forgotten to do something. Then, a few days later, when I was watching a repeat of a historical drama I heard the click-clack sound. It hit me like a bolt of lightning.”

And then her mother had waited for an opportunity to use them. But it seems a historical drama really was the impetus for this, after all.

“Today’s a special occasion, so it’s appropriate, right?”

As Yumi’s mother finished explaining, and returned to chatting, she once more turned Yumi’s body around so they were facing each other.

“But it’s not my graduation ceremony.”

“Even so, you’ve got a big job ahead of you, right Yumi-chan?”

“Yeah.”

Click-clack. Having the sparks scatter behind her back was one step forward. Although there was no scientific basis for it having any effect, just having someone willing to do that for her made Yumi feel better.

“Take care.”

“I’m heading out.”

The muscles along Yumi’s spine felt somewhat refreshed as she stretched. That kind of feeling.

Having just left the front door, Yumi saw her father as he returned home.

“Oh, you’re on your way out?”

“Yeah.”

Yumi’s father had recently taken up jogging in the morning. Although he would occasionally visit building sites or customers’ homes, he felt like he wasn’t getting enough exercise because he had a home office.

“Give it your all. Well, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san will be there for you if you need them, so I’m sure you’ll be alright.”

As her father focused on patting her on the shoulder, Yumi could see his stomach bulging out, just a little bit.

“Hehehe, I’m off now.”

After waving to her father, Yumi jogged towards the bus stop.

She had only spent a little time with each of them, but adding up all the time spent dealing with her family meant it would be close as to whether or not she would make it in time to get on the bus she had planned on catching.

Turning the corner on Persimmon Street.

Her field of vision widened, and the blue sky flew into sight.

It looked like the weather was going to be fine today.

The Green Bird and the White Flower

Part 1.

Yumi was standing by the bus doors so when it arrived at the Lillian Girls Academy stop she was the first off, leading the charge across the pedestrian bridge.

There was still some time until they were supposed to meet. Even if she walked to the classroom, she probably wouldn't be late.

(Even so.)

If five of the six people were already there, the last person to arrive would give the impression of being late even if they were a few minutes early.

(Especially considering...)

Yoshino-san was one of the members, so Yumi expected some irrational complaints. Ahh, she could just imagine it. Yoshino-san standing there with her hands on her hips, saying, 'You're laaate.'

When she got on the bus, Yumi had checked to see if any of the four people she was going to meet (excluding Yoshino-san, who walked to school) were also on board, but she couldn't see any of them. They had all probably caught an earlier bus. As expected, missing the earlier bus to the station had cost her.

Yumi wanted to run, but she thought of the students that were following behind her and instead decided just to walk quickly. As the next Rosa Chinensis, it would not be proper for her to be seen running around with her skirt in disarray.

"Oh?"

Just before the fork in the ginkgo tree lined path, Yumi saw the back of a person that she knew well.

“Kanako-chan?”

There was no need to wait until she had turned around to confirm this. There were very few students at this school who were as tall as she.

“Ahh. Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama.”

“What’s the matter?”

Since Kanako had arrived here before Yumi, that meant she must have been on an earlier bus. But if that was the case, then she had taken quite a long time to only get to here. The previous bus would have arrived over five minutes ago, and if it had hit traffic there should have been other students here with her too. Furthermore, Kanako-chan was just standing there.

“It’s a bird.”

“A bird?”

“Just after I’d stepped through the front gates, a tiny bird on a branch caught my attention so I stopped to watch it.”

“For five minutes, or ten minutes?”

“No,”

Kanako-chan smiled.

“It was probably only two or three minutes. I felt like I could stay and watch it forever, but I had to get moving again. When I got here, I saw a student offering another her rosary, so I waited until they were finished.”

“I see.”

Looking further down the path, Yumi saw two students walking away hand-in-hand. They had probably waited until the crowd of people had passed through before performing the rosary ceremony. Kanako-chan, who had stopped to watch the bird, had become separated from the crowd of people and happened to arrive at just the wrong time.

Like Yumi had witnessed earlier, there were people that would wait until the day before, or the day of, the graduation ceremony to decide to become soeurs. Don't tell me that the onee-sama is a third year, ..., no, there's no way that could be the case.

"Shall we walk together."

Yumi urged Kanako-chan on, and they walked over to the statue of Maria-sama and prayed alongside each other. While they were standing around talking, the next wave of people was bearing down on them.

"You said it was a tiny bird, but what kind of bird was it?"

Yumi asked Kanako-chan, as they walked towards the school building.

"It was a green color, that looked like powdered green tea."

"A Bush Warbler?"

When she heard it described as small and the color of powdered green tea, that was the first bird that came to mind. Yumi looked up. Of course, the small bird that Kanako-chan had seen was nowhere in sight.

"That's what I thought too, so I stopped to have a look at it. I guess it is the time of the year for plum blossoms, after all."

Which means.

"You don't think so?"

Kanako-chan shrugged her shoulders when asked this.

"I can't really say for certain. I was a fair way away from it, and couldn't see all of it. It could have been a white-eye. It didn't really look like a parrot, but it could probably be identified by its call."

"Did it sound like 'hoohokekyo'?"

"Yeah, that's what it sounded like."

If its call was ‘hoohokekyo,’ then it was undoubtedly a Bush Warbler. No parrot would be able to imitate that sound.

“Do you know what the call of the white-eye sounds like?”

“Nope. But at the very least, it wouldn’t sound like ‘hoohokekyo,’ right?”

“I suppose so.”

Just then, they heard a ‘caw-caw’ sound coming from somewhere.

“And it’s not that either.”

The pair looked at each other and laughed.

Part 2.

“You’re laaaate.”

Just as Yumi had envisaged, when she opened the door to the second year pine group classroom Yoshino-san was standing there looking imposing.

“Umm, Yoshino-san, according to my watch there’s still one minute...”

Before Yumi could open her mouth, Mami-san of the newspaper club tried to intervene, but Yoshino-san quickly stamped that out, saying ‘You should have been here five minutes early.’

Yumi instinctively nodded her head, but if you think about it, it’s a strange rationale. If they really needed that extra five minutes they could just have arranged to meet five minutes earlier.

“Well, now that everyone’s here, let’s go.”

Yoshino-san seized the initiative, stripping Yumi of her coat and bag before heading off, like a bus tour guide. The five other members blinked, shrugged, then followed after her.

“Why is Yoshino-san so pumped up?”

Misa-san whispered to Yumi as they were walking along.

“Huh?”

Now that she mentioned it, Yoshino-san definitely looked tense. Having just arrived at school, Yumi didn't really know what was going on. But she really wanted to hear what Yoshino-san had been doing in the classroom before she arrived.

“Who knows?”

While Yumi-san wracked her brain, Itsue-san slowed down so that she was also walking alongside Yumi-san and joined their conversation, saying ‘It’s a mystery, that’s for sure.’

“It’s much better for Yumi-san, since your onee-sama is in the third year pine group.”

From her left and right sides, Yumi heard her classmates saying, ‘Right?’ Yumi’s heart was thumping, hoping that Yoshino-san, walking ahead of her, couldn’t hear them but it looked like Yoshino-san was talking with Mami-san and Satoe-san, so she was probably okay.

Yoshino-san, Mami-san, Satoe-san, Itsue-san, Misa-san and then Yumi. Such a strange combination of people in the group, but they were the ones appointed from the second year pine group to the task of pinning flowers to the chests of the graduating students.

It was a tradition that the students who would perform this blessing for the graduating seniors were from the same group but the year below. In other words, the ones that would pin the flower to the chest of the third year pine group were from the second year pine group. Which is why they had said that she was much better off, since her onee-sama was in the third year pine group. And it was also why it was such a mystery that Yoshino-san was so pumped up, since her onee-sama was in the third year chrysanthemum group.

“But she’s been bursting with enthusiasm ever since we decided who was involved.”

When Yumi said this, the girls to her left and right said, ‘That’s true,’ nodded, and folded their arms.

* * *

This happened about a week ago.

When they arrived for their afternoon homeroom, the following discussion topic was written in big, bold letters on the blackboard:

Helpers for the day of the graduation ceremony

Below that was written;

- 1: Students to pin flowers to the graduating seniors (6 names)
- 2: Students to decorate the classroom (a few names)

“Are there any volunteers?”

When Kaede-san, who was leading the discussion, asked this most of the students raised their hands. Their homeroom teacher was watching on silently, undoubtedly thinking, ‘I wish they’d show this much enthusiasm during class.’

“Should we give preference to those students whose onee-sama is in the third year pine group?”

“But surely the petit soeurs would have been there before? Wouldn’t it be better to give this chance to students who haven’t had any reason to visit their beloved seniors?”

“It should be based on who wants to go the most ... but there’s no way to measure that.”

Everyone had their own ideas about how it should be decided, but it didn't look like they would come to any sort of agreement.

As the heated discussion raged around her Yumi didn't try to voice her opinion, instead daydreaming about how nice it would be to pin the flower to her onee-sama's chest. Although she made sure she raised her hand when the call for volunteers went out.

"For fairness sake, we'll decide this with scissors-paper-rock."

In the end that was the approach they agreed upon. At first it seemed that no-one objected to it, but someone behind Yumi quickly raised their hand. It was Michiyo-san, who had earlier suggested that the students with an onee-sama in the third year pine group should get priority.

"I just want to check something. If someone wins the privilege through scissors-paper-rock, can they transfer that to someone else?"

"Huh?"

At first no-one really understood what she was trying to say.

"Because..."

She explained that because she didn't have an onee-sama in the third year pine group, it wasn't something that she wanted to do no matter what. So if she won, she would turn over her position to someone who did have an onee-sama in the third year pine group, if allowed. Such a kind girl.

"That's okay, I guess."

The transfer wasn't limited just to people who had an onee-sama in that class, it could be given to anyone, so good friends could pitch in and help each other. There were no objections.

"Well then, Katori-sensei, can you do the honors?"

At Kaede-san's insistence, their homeroom teacher took center stage.

For the first round of the contest, the whole class would play against their teacher. Only those who won would advance to the second round. A draw was the same as a loss. This way the whole class could be involved, but it would be sorted out in two or three rounds. This would continue until there were only six people remaining – if there were fewer, then the people that had been eliminated in the previous round would play-off for the remaining places. These were the rules they had decided upon.

“Scissors, paper, ”

It was Yoshino-san that was conspicuously shouting this out.

“Rock.”

Yumi was wondering what percentage enthusiasm played in whether someone won or lost at scissors-paper-rock.

“Uwaaaah!”

About thirty students held one of their hands above their head in either the scissors, paper or rock gestures. Amongst the various cries of joy and despair, Yoshino-san’s cry of ‘yeah’ could be heard as she held aloft her right hand in the winning form of scissors. In a seat some distance away, Yumi looked up at her own open hand and sighed.

Their teacher had gone with paper. And a draw was a loss. It felt kind of hollow. Yumi thought she would have felt better if she had put out rock, and been properly defeated.

The winners were decided after the second round.

The six people were Yoshino-san, Satoe-san, Itsue-san, Misa-san, Michiyo-san and Minato-san.

“So is there anyone among you that want to transfer this privilege to someone else – ”

Surprisingly, everyone except Yoshino-san raised their hand to this. Yumi probably wasn’t the only one to think ‘what a shame’ when they saw this.

“Well then, let’s hear who you want to transfer it to and confirm whether or not they will accept. We’ll start with you, Michiyo-san, since you originally proposed this idea.”

“I’d like to give this to Fukuzawa Yumi-san.”

“Huh!?”

Not expecting to be named, Yumi’s eyes widened in shock. Everyone turned to look at her, but they were all in the same class so it didn’t bother Yumi. So, on reflex, Yumi pointed her finger at herself and asked, ‘Me?’ Michiyo-san nodded in agreement.

“Won’t you accept this in place of me?”

“...Is that okay?”

This was something she hadn’t asked for. Michiyo-san agreed immediately, without hesitation.

“Wait a minute!”

Satoe-san, Itsue-san and Misa-san all cried out at the same time.

“We also wanted to give our positions to Yumi-san.”

“Huuuh!?”

Fukuzawa Yumi was hugely popular. Or, more likely, everyone was feeling sorry for Yumi, whose onee-sama was in the third year pine group.

“But Yumi-san is just one person.”

Even if she were to accept all their proposals, one person could not fill four chairs.

“If there’s anyone else who has an onee-sama in the third year pine group that wants to take part – ”

Itsue-san offered, but no-one raised their hand.

“Very well then.”

With that, the three others resolved to carry out their duties and took back their declarations to stand down.

Still, Yumi felt incredibly happy.

“My thanks to all of you.”

Yumi bowed her head, and thanked them from the bottom of her heart.

“But what about Minato-san?”

That’s right, Minato-san also raised her hand when they were asked if anyone wanted to transfer their winnings.

“I’m sorry. I just got caught up in playing scissors-paper-rock, but can I be moved into the second group – to help with putting up decorations around the classroom.”

“Sure. There’s no limit on how many people can be involved in that.”

Kaede-san wrote Minato-san’s name down under the second heading.

“Although, if possible you should name someone to take your place.”

There were plenty of people who wanted to take part. But another round of scissors-paper-rock would be time consuming.

“Then, Tsutako-san.”

A few scattered cries of excitement could be heard, from girls thinking about Tsutako-san being there.

“Thank-you. But I’m sorry, I can’t accept.”

This time around the scattered cries were of dejection. The tone of the voices rose and fell. If you were able to see sound with your eyes, the inside of the second year pine group's classroom would probably look like a gigantic wave.

“Why's that?”

Don't do it if you don't want to. Kaede-san asked, although normally you wouldn't ask an individual why they refused. Kaede-san probably thought that everyone wanted to hear Tsutako-san's reason. Because it seemed more in keeping with Tsutako-san's character that she would have said, ‘I'll do it.’

“If I accepted your offer, I'd want to take pictures of it, right.”

Tsutako-san answered immediately, while stroking her small camera.

“Huh?”

Yumi thought that was probably what Minato-san expected when she named her. Everyone knew that Tsutako-san was the ace of the photography club. Tsutako-san and her camera had an inseparable relationship.

“But the job isn't about taking photos, it's about pinning the flowers to the seniors, so I wouldn't be able to take my camera.”

When put that way, it seemed like quite a natural response.

“Then would you go to the third year pine group's classroom if you weren't responsible for pinning the flowers on the seniors?”

Someone asked, not wanting to let the matter drop. If they weren't able to take part themselves, they at least wanted to see some photos of it.

“I wouldn't, because it's not my class.”

Tsutako-san smiled.

“So, I'm sorry.”

Even if they were to try and pressure her further, Tsutako-san probably wouldn't agree to it. Minato-san said, 'Well then,' and faced a different direction.

"How about Mami-san? Would you refuse because you wanted to collect information for a newspaper report?"

The Mami-san that had been named was the head of the newspaper club.

"Not at all. I don't need something like a camera to be able to gather information. So I'll gladly accept your offer."

Mami-san happily expanded on that, saying she would burn the information into her memory and write an article about it to appear in the commemorative graduation edition of the Lillian Kwaraban.

And that was the story about how these six people had been chosen for this job.

"I was thinking about giving you my spot, you know."

Yoshino-san had idly remarked to her, much later.

"But since it was Michiyo-san that originally brought up the topic of passing on the privilege, I let her have the honor this time."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Well, of course. It's only natural that I would think about letting my dear friend have the opportunity to pin the flower on her onee-sama."

When it came to games of chance, Yoshino-san didn't seem to care about appearances, only wanting to win.

"Thank-you."

At any rate, Yumi chose to express her gratitude towards her friend.

Part 3.

“Wouldn’t you agree that Yoshino-san just loves an occasion?”

Itsue-san said as they flew down the corridor together, watching their classmates ahead of them.

“Loves an occasion...?”

“Don’t you think she gets worked up whenever there’s an event? She was in fine form for the athletics festival and the school festival.”

Hmm, perhaps she was on to something. Prior to the autumn of her first year of high school, Yoshino-san had been forced to abstain from a lot of activities due to her heart condition. Now that her body was healthy due to the surgery, her excitement made her reluctant to step aside whenever there was an event.

In this way, the spectacle of the graduation ceremony made her rush to accept the opportunity that was offered to her. That was the explanation tentatively put forth.

(However...)

What that all it was? Yumi felt it was selling Yoshino-san short.

Was Yoshino-san in such an excited state solely because of the spectacle of the graduation ceremony?

Well, it was only reasonable that Yoshino-san should be excited because her most precious onee-sama, Rei-sama, was graduating. But she’d known about Rei-sama’s graduation for a long time now, and recently she looked as though she was no longer bothered by it.

More than just excitement, it felt as though Yoshino-san was going to explode at any moment. So you’d see her chatting, or flitting around, as a way of concealing this.

They'd had countless rehearsals for the graduation ceremony, so it would be strange for her to be panicking about that now (although there's a difference in tension for a rehearsal and for the real thing, of course).

On the other hand, the evening get-togethers of the Hasekura and Shimazu families had been dour affairs in the lead up to the graduation ceremony, so perhaps Yoshino-san hadn't been able to get excited until now.

(Hmmmmm.)

There was probably something in that. Come to think of it, Yoshino-san was all aflutter about something yesterday afternoon.

“What is it?”

In front of the staff room, Yoshino-san turned around and looked at Yumi.

“Uhh, nothing?”

“You look as though you want to say something.”

“No way!”

Misa-san and Itsue-san shook their heads. No-one in their class wanted to make the wrong move and risk setting off the Yoshino-bomb. They had learned that from past experience.

“Really?”

Then that was settled, and Yoshino-san put her hand on the doorknob.

“Excuse me, we've come to pick up the flowers. Oh?”

As the door rattled open, they saw that some other visitors had arrived before them.

“Oh my.”

Shimako-san and Katsura-san were there. Which means they must be the second year wisteria class. Apart from those two, there was another person with them – so three people in total.

“Yoshino-san, are you and the other girls going to pin the flowers to your seniors?”

Shimako-san asked, smiling meekly.

“Well...yeah.”

In contrast, Yoshino-san had been visibly knocked off balance.

The general reasons for that could be easily guessed.

Firstly, they weren't the first class to arrive at the staff room (and they hadn't even been aware that the wisteria class was already there).

Secondly, the white corsages for each class were contained within three boxes, so there was no need for all six of them to come and collect them (the boxes weren't large enough that they needed two people to carry them, and because they only contained corsages, they were light).

And those were both things that Yoshino-san had taken the initiative and decided upon (that they would wait until everyone was there, and then go to the staff room to collect the flowers).

Yoshino-san realized all of this in an instant. So she was beside herself with remorse.

“Well then, we'll be off now.”

Yoshino-san clenched her fists tightly as she saw the girls from the second year wisteria group file out smartly, each carrying one of the boxes. The five other girls all thought, ‘That kind of thing really doesn't matter,’ but none of them were brave enough to say it.

The three boxes marked ‘third year pine class’ were picked up by three of the girls and they were on their way out of the staff room when this time

they ran into students from the second year chrysanthemum class. There were five of them from that class. – so it didn't look like there was any reason to worry about the numbers.

“Yoshino-san, are you and the other girls going to pin the flowers to your seniors?”

The exact same words they heard a short while ago, albeit from a different person.

“Well...yeah.”

And the exact same response. Yumi sensed Yoshino-san's blood boiling and confiscated the box she had been holding. Yoshino-san seemed really annoyed. If things had continued, she looked like she would crush the box and all the corsages within it.

Let's see, we were the ones who arrived at the staff room before them. And as for the numbers, there's no big difference between five and six people.

So Yumi was wondering what the problem was, when she saw that Yoshino-san was looking only at one person in particular. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say she was scowling at someone.

(Ah.)

That's it. That person over there was Tanuma Chisato-san.

Chisato-san, whether she intended to or not, was extremely good at rubbing Yoshino-san the wrong way. They were both in the kendo club, and had been a couple for the Valentine's Day dates. Yumi had seen them together on several occasions, but they never really seemed compatible – .

“... so that means you're also handing out the flowers then, Chisato-san.”

Yoshino-san was visibly displeased as she said this.

“That's right.”

A grinning Chisato-san answered. Incredible. As though she hadn't noticed Yoshino-san's glare.

"Oh, okay."

Glare-glare-glare-glaaaaare.

The second year chrysanthemum group were in charge of the third year chrysanthemum group. Chisato-san was responsible for Rei-sama's class. It was clear that this was the cause of Yoshino-san's displeasure. There was nothing you could do to influence which class you were put in, but even so, Yoshino-san was undoubtedly asking herself why she couldn't have been in the chrysanthemum group.

Rei-sama's onee-sama, Torii Eriko-sama, had been in the third year chrysanthemum group. And Rei-sama had been in the second year chrysanthemum group at that time. Because of that, they fought alongside each other in the same colored headbands during the athletics festival and, on the day of the graduation ceremony, the petit soeur was able to pin the flower to the chest of her onee-sama.

"Do you want to stand in for me?"

Once more, that Chisato-san said something that could never happen. Whether or not she meant it as a joke, Yoshino-san wasn't laughing.

"I'm fine. Let's go, Yumi-san."

As Yumi was thinking that she didn't really want to get mixed up in all of this, Yoshino-san grabbed her arm with incredible strength and dragged her out into the hallway.

On the way out, Yoshino-san stopped and turned around, perhaps having changed her mind.

"I'm fine with not standing in for you. You're going to the third year chrysanthemum group as a representative of all the students enrolled at this school. In other words, you're already acting as a stand in for me."

It was said with such force and finality that it didn't allow for any comeback. Even so, Yumi was moved by those words.

A representative of all the students enrolled at this school, huh?

Such a nice thing to say, dear friend.

Part 4.

They returned to their classroom, opened the boxes and counted out the number of flowers.

The corsages looked like roses, with many white petals. They glittered and sparkled with such brilliance it was almost painful to look at them.

After confirming there were the correct number of corsages and practicing the ceremony from start to finish, there was nothing more left to do. They were all probably thinking that they could have arranged to meet ten minutes later, but no-one said anything. Anyway, it was good that they weren't rushed.

The morning prayers weren't broadcast over the PA system during homeroom today. The roll call was quickly dispensed with and the six of them promptly left the classroom heading for the third year classrooms.

"A while ago Minato-san told me that the art club's president's class ... is it peach? or camellia? ... did something incredible."

Itsue-san said as they walked down the hallway.

"Incredible how?"

The other five asked for specifics. They were walking double-file, so they were all bunched together.

"The classroom decorations. Minato-san and the others were worried about theirs, so they had a look at what the other classes had done. Only one of

them stood out as being on a different level.”

“You say it was on a different level, but there’s a limit to how good it could be, right?”

Because there were established traditions about how the decorations of the third year classrooms should be done, to avoid classes trying to outdo each other. The front and rear blackboards, the windows and the surface of the walls could all be decorated. The allowed materials were imitation Japanese vellum, paper streamers, tissue paper (a limited amount) and the chalk that was in the classroom. They could also use cellophane tape, glue or magic markers they had in their own classroom.

“There were pictures drawn on the blackboards in chalk that looked like ink and wash paintings. And they made a dragon out of the imitation vellum.”

“A dragon?”

A revitalized Yoshino-san mumbled, while Yumi just shook her head.

“A flying dragon.”

This was all hearsay, so some of the specifics may be wrong, but it seems the blackboard had a picture of carp swimming up a waterfall and the dragon (sculpture?) was above the blackboard. The cheerful sketch showing carp turning into dragons was probably intended to represent the seniors graduating from school. As you would expect from the head of the arts club. Her interest piqued by the conversation, Yumi wanted to have a look at this later, if possible.

The group arrived at the third year classrooms after discussing various things, including an update from Satoe-san about her cat, Mii-tan. The third year pine group’s classroom door was closed tight, and they could hear the teacher’s voice coming from inside. It seemed as though they were still in the middle of homeroom.

While they were waiting outside, the homeroom finished and the teacher in charge came out to get them.

“Thank-you for your effort.”

Looking at Yumi’s group, the teacher gave them the okay to enter.

“Excuse us.”

Mami-san bowed before stepping foot inside the classroom. Yoshino-san, who until recently had been exultant, handed over her lead position right before entering the classroom.

This was a solemn occasion for the graduating seniors. They couldn’t afford to make a single careless mistake. Whether or not Yoshino-san was reflecting on this, she seemed to be frozen to the spot.

On that point, Mami-san was the type of person who could handle anything flawlessly. She wasn’t even slightly perturbed about suddenly being asked to go in first. Her comment to a worried Yoshino-san of, ‘I’m just the herald. The king comes afterwards,’ was said with irony.

The remaining five girls filed in after Mami-san. Yumi located her onee-sama instantly, but she repeated, ‘I’m here as a representative of everyone,’ to herself and tried earnestly to restrain her face, hands and feet from moving of their own accord.

The inside of the classroom was beautifully decorated. A group of girls wearing the Lillian’s uniform with a speech bubble saying, ‘Congratulations on your graduation’ were drawn on the blackboard. The illustrated figures were holding a bouquet of flowers made out of tissue paper. The flowers weren’t just ordinary folded flowers either, the center of the flowers were all different colors, and the variously colored petals were intricately woven together. And on the windows, they had created constellations of stars out of paper streamers – .

Minato-san may have lost confidence after seeing what Ayane-san’s class had done, but Yumi thought it turned out wonderfully. If Minato-san were here, Yumi would congratulate her, saying, ‘That’s what you’d expect from the manga club,’ but unfortunately she wasn’t there.

“Congratulations on today.”

Mami-san acted as their representative and greeted the third years.

“We will now pin the flowers to your chests. We will try our best to do this properly, but if we make a mistake please don’t hesitate to tell us.”

The line of six girls all bowed as one, then stood as three pairs beside the three boxes they had brought. The pairs were Satoe-san and Misa-san, Itsue-san and Mami-san, and, finally, Yumi and Yoshino-san.

“Yumi-san and Yoshino-san, please take the center.”

Hearing Mami-san’s instructions, Yumi was taken aback when she realized their significance. The second year students would be walking around to the graduating students desks to pin the flowers to them, and towards the back of the center area was the desk of none other than her onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

(So then –)

That wasn’t just coincidence, nor would it be arrogant to say that everyone seemed to be looking out for her. Allowing her to pin the flower to the chest of her onee-sama was a huge gesture of kindness from her friends.

Could that be it? Surely it must be. She wasn’t given this position just so she could watch her onee-sama. If she were to refuse now, it would be an insult to Michiyo-san, who gave her this position. Therefore, Yumi obediently stood in the center.

At any rate, her onee-sama’s seat was still a way off. Yumi resolved to do her best for all the students she would pin a flower to.

“Congratulations.”

Yumi took one of the white corsages from the box that Yoshino-san was carrying, unfastened the safety-pin and attached it to the chest area of the girl’s school uniform.

“Thank-you.”

There were students who would just say that, and others who would talk more.

“Congratulations.”

Tall or short, long-haired or short-haired, buxom or slender, the corsage was always put on in the same way, but there were times when it went quickly and easily, and other times when it took longer.

And in the middle of that.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank-you.”

Normally, this was where Yumi would say, ‘Excuse me,’ and then pin the flower to the girl’s chest, but for some reason her hand stopped. Huh? That girl’s previous movement had been kind of awkward. What was this feeling?

Yumi withdrew her arm that was holding out the white corsage, and had another look at the person in front of her.

She was the short and cute type. Yumi had the feeling she had seen her somewhere before, but couldn’t remember who she was. Yumi had come to this classroom many times asking for her onee-sama, so there were many students who had acted as an agent for her. Could this girl be one of them?

Yumi couldn’t remember who this was, but she did know why her hand had faltered. The girl was looking at Yumi as though she wanted to say something. And Yumi had noticed that. What could it be?

“Umm.”

It would be strange to ask ‘who are you?’ but Yumi felt that just standing there like that wasn’t helping either of them. Engaging in a staring contest until her memories returned was no good. Yoshino-san, who was standing

beside her holding the box, was probably starting to wonder what was going on. Perhaps seeing the commotion in Yumi's heart, that girl let out a soft sigh, smiled, and then moved both her hands behind her neck.

(Huh?)

That movement had been a prelude to her changing her hairstyle. She took her hair that reached just below her shoulders, split it between her two hands and pulled one bundle alongside each ear before looking at Yumi.

“Ah.”

Yumi had definitely seen someone who looked like that before. Although, at the time, her hair had been shorter – barely long enough to tie in two. And she had said something to Yumi. It was... this:

Yumi-san, have you come here to look for the card?

“Valentine!”

It was on Valentines Day. During last year's Valentines Day treasure hunt, she and Yumi had both looked for the crimson card inside the greenhouse. Yumi had dug in the ground beside the Rosa Chinensis plant, but found nothing. She was the only one who had seen the entire event, the sole witness.

When Yumi had said ‘Valentine,’ the girl had initially looked surprised, but then seemed to remember and smiled as she let her hair down.

“I'd been worried about it ever since. That I'd done something wrong by you, Yumi-san. But now that we've reached the end, perhaps it's Maria-sama's blessing that you're the one to pin the flower to my chest.”

“Huh?”

“Should I tell Sachiko-san about what happened on that day ... that's what I was thinking.”

She didn't turn around as she spoke of Valentines Day, but there was no doubt that Sachiko-sama, sitting two rows behind her, was on her mind.

Yumi too had spent some time thinking about it.

On that day, if Yumi hadn't met 'that person' in the greenhouse, would she have found the crimson card herself?

On that day, if 'that person' hadn't stayed alone in the greenhouse, would the crimson card have remained missing, and the event finished without anyone knowing who had found the card and spirited it away?

On that day, why hadn't the person that found the crimson card come forth as the winner of the treasure hunt?

Why had the crimson card been dug up and then returned to its original hiding place?

Yumi didn't know. No matter how much she had thought about it, she could never come up with a plausible theory.

Not without solving the riddle of who 'that person' was.

Not without talking to 'that person.'

And now, 'that person' was here in front of her. And was wondering if she should talk about the events of that day.

"It's okay as is."

Yumi answered.

After all, her onee-sama had believed what Yumi had said back then and they had been able to reconcile after the previous day's quarrel. And even though Yumi hadn't been able to find the crimson card, the two of them had been able to go on a date.

To go over the things that had happened back then wouldn't change a thing. There was nothing that had to be regained.

“But, well... you.”

She was about to say something about Valentines Day, but Yumi shook her head. There was no need to force the truth to light. That was why Yumi chose to quote the words that Sachiko-sama had said back then.

“That was Saint Valentine’s prank.”

And with that, Yumi caused a white flower to bloom in Valentine’s chest.

But even so, that person had been a senior. No wonder Yumi hadn’t found her when she searched her classmates. It would be impolite to say it, but even now she looked so young that she wouldn’t seem out of place amongst the first years.

Yoshino-san looked at her and said ‘what was?’ but Yumi didn’t really have time to explain now, so she let it drop. Yoshino-san seemed to understand this too, but she made a signal with her eyes that said, ‘I’ll ask you about this later.’

After three more people, it was Sachiko-sama’s turn.

“Congratulations.”

She may be her onee-sama, but it would be odd if Yumi were to treat her any differently to everyone else. So Yumi tried her best to act impartially, but despite her efforts something special happened.

“Ahh, yeah.”

Sachiko-sama cleared her throat. At which point the people around her hastily looked away. Yumi hadn’t noticed, but it seemed that the Red Rose sisters had become an exhibition. Come to think of it, her onee-sama had been worried about her classmates spying on them when they had exchanged chocolates on Valentines Day too.

(Hmmm.)

So what can we draw from this previous exchange?

1. There are a lot of sticky-beaks in the third year pine class.
2. Ogasawara Sachiko is highly attuned to when people are looking at her.
3. In contrast, Fukuzawa Yumi is completely oblivious to this.

That's probably everything.

"It's okay, please pin the flower to me."

Sachiko-sama said. Yumi glanced around, to see how many people were looking at her. Everyone seemed to be minding their own business, but they would still steal the occasional glance. Despite this, nobody was openly staring at them and Sachiko-sama had apparently decided that was sufficient. If she were to wait until no-one was looking their way, they would probably be there all day, and things were already strained.

"Well then, please excuse me."

Yumi took a white corsage from the box and quickly pierced the chest of her onee-sama's school uniform with the safety pin. After traveling about one centimeter beneath the dark fabric the tip of the pin surfaced.

Ahh, she'd run the pin exactly horizontal. And the length was perfect too. Consequently, the flower wasn't lopsided nor would it sway. Yumi was thinking, 'All I have to do now is catch the pin in the clasp and I'll be done,' but then:

"Huh?"

Sachiko-sama hooked something long and black over Yumi's right wrist.

"Keep going."

"...Ah, yeah."

In the interval between returning the safety pin to its original state and adjusting the flower, the long, black object was loosely tied around her wrist.

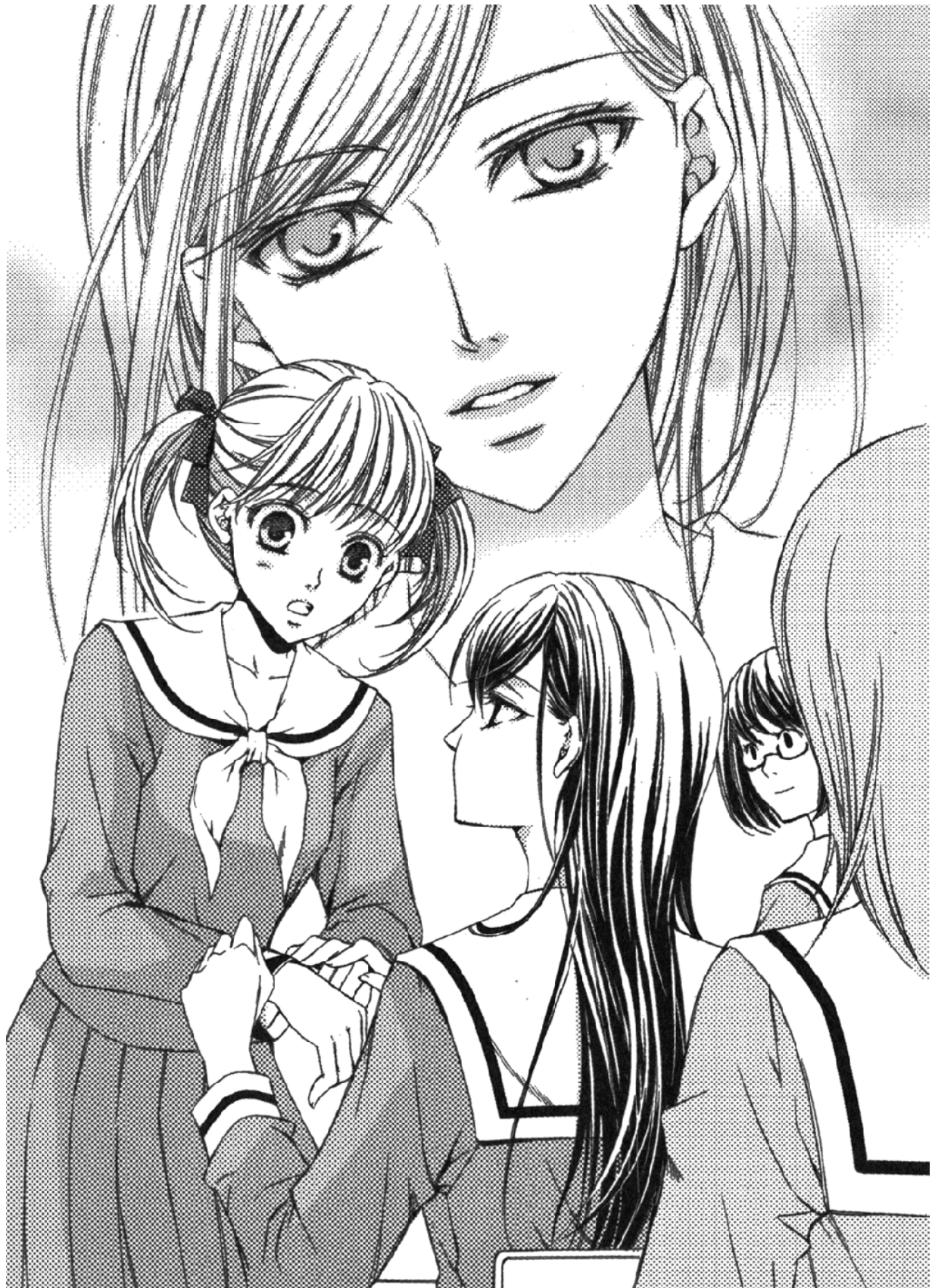
It was the black ribbon.

The Christmas present that Sachiko-sama had received from Yumi on Christmas Eve two years ago.

The ribbon that Yumi found in the first floor of the Rose Mansion yesterday, causing her to run off in search of her onee-sama, thinking that she had to return it.

The ribbon that had tightly bound their wrists together as they cried and embraced each other.

That ribbon was here, now.





“Look after it.”

Sachiko-sama spoke.

“Until the ceremony is over.”

Yumi understood that Sachiko-sama was saying that this was a charm. That she wanted Yumi to look after the ribbon that originally had been hers, but was now Sachiko-sama’s property.

During the graduation ceremony, the graduating students all sat towards the front of the vast gymnasium, clearly separated from the rest of the students who sat towards the back. But the two of them would be tightly bound together by this ribbon. So it will be okay, was undoubtedly what Sachiko-sama wanted to say.

Perhaps thinking that it wouldn’t be good to have it in such a conspicuous location, Sachiko-sama gently untied the ribbon and placed it across the palms of Yumi’s hands.

“You can just keep it in your pocket.”

“Okay.”

Yumi snapped both her hands shut around the ribbon like a clam, wrapped it up and then put it in her pocket, as she had been told to. Then she said, ‘I’m done,’ and moved one row back to pin the flower to the chest of the next student.

For some reason, a round of applause broke out.

Ahh, that must be it.

It seems they had put on quite the show.

Still, no matter how much they applauded, there would be no encore.

Part 5.

At roughly the same time, in the third year chrysanthemum classroom.

The same ceremony, with the second years pinning the white corsages to the chest of the third years, was taking place.

As soon as she had entered the classroom, Tanuma Chisato was assaulted by the unexpected scene that met her eyes. Of all the things in the classroom that vied for her attention, the most obvious was the large space occupied by the blackboard. That was where the students responsible for decorating the classroom had concentrated their congratulatory messages.

“Congratulations on your graduation.”

That message was probably written inside every classroom. Some of them may have ‘Happy graduation’ instead, but both had essentially the same meaning. Around the edges of the blackboard were what appeared to be yellow flowers in the shape of the chrysanthemum that were made out of tissue paper. These too were appropriately congratulatory. The problem lay with what was in the margins of the blackboard.

“Tears of joy when you *hear* Auld Lang Syne.”¹

The italics are used to represent words that were puns on the class name in the original Japanese. Chrysanthemum doesn't really lend itself to puns in English.

“*Laughter and groans* at the lame jokes in the PTA president's speech.”

“*Pay no attention* to those arguing about not wanting to graduate.”

“*Kick and punch* at your entrance exams.”

Etcetera etcetera. Puns on ‘chrysanthemum’ filled the otherwise empty space. Was this supposed to be the final act in a vaudeville play?

As she was thinking this, Chisato remembered that the leader of the group of girls who decorated the room was quite the joker. She’d heard that one of the other classes had a dragon and an ink painting, so it looked like there was quite a gap between the classes. But even so, how would the seniors react to the puns written on the board?

The six girls were a bit worried, and were trying to ascertain the situation when some voices called out to them.

“Hey, hey, how about *Shouting* out gokigenyou?”

“Thanks for the *kind* puns, right?”

Chisato was so glad to see there were students like that in this class. Such a monumental relief.

(Well then.)

Having pulled herself together, Chisato looked at the rows of desks all lined up. And then.

(... there she is.)

Having found the person she was looking for, Chisato deftly positioned herself in front of her row of desks. Their positions weren’t determined on a first-come first-served basis. This was the natural right of the victor.

Chisato was good at scissors-paper-rock.

After all is said and done, scissors-paper-rock is a game of intuition. Or, you could say, of inspiration. Maybe sense, too.

The first step is to clear your head.

There was absolutely no point in interlinking your fingers then raising that up to your face and peeking out from the small gap between your fingers.

Similarly, there was no point in pinching the back of your left hand to look at the wrinkle that's formed. But when it's a one-on-one match, there were certain things you could do to unnerve your opponent.

When it comes time to decide the battle, make your hand into a fist and raise it powerfully overhead at the words 'scissors-paper'. Then, in the next instant, replay the last thirty seconds or so, looking for the signal. Then when you've found that signal, keep your fingers as they are. The shape will come afterwards. Whether you hold out two fingers, flatten them all, or keep them bunched up, that's all there is to it. So maybe it's not just intuition, but a certain amount of processing throughput that's required. If anything in the chain of events doesn't happen at precisely the right time then the plan is ruined and you'll be accused of waiting to see your opponent's move before responding.

And that was how Chisato won the right to pin the flower to the chest of her beloved senior, Hasekura Rei-sama. Apologies to Yoshino-san, but this was the only possible outcome. She too was a good competitor at scissors-paper-rock, but luck wasn't on her side. The outcome had been decided when she was moved into the pine group.

Even so, when Chisato had blurted out, 'Do you want to stand in for me?' it had been said sincerely, with no malicious intent. Because it was such an implausible thing to say there was only one way that Yoshino-san was likely to interpret the offer, but when Chisato saw the look of regret on Yoshino-san's face the words had just slipped out of her mouth. So if Yoshino-san had said yes, she would have persuaded her classmates to let them trade places, just this once. But in the end, Yoshino-san had refused and nothing had come of it.

"Congratulations."

And so Chisato reflected upon the fact that she was standing in for Yoshino-san, just like she had been told.

"Thank-you, Chisato-chan."

Rei-sama smiled sweetly.

“It’s only been one year since you joined the kendo club, but you’ve worked hard and caught up with everyone. Quite impressive. And I’ve often seen you helping out the juniors.”

“... Rei-sama.”

Chisato was desperate for Rei-sama to look at her properly as she kept babbling on.

At first she had admired Rei-sama, and Chisato had initially joined the kendo club because she wanted to appeal to her. She had found compatriots within the kendo club and, although she was still a bit raw, could hold her own against club members in the same year level. And now she had the pleasure of being able to pin the flower to Rei-sama’s chest. You could think of it as a present from Maria-sama.

“Rei-sama.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m grateful to you Rei-sama.”

“Why so?”

Rei-sama acted dumb, seemingly saying, ‘But I’m the one receiving the flower, right?’

“Because of all the things that I’ve received from you.”

Having finished attaching the flower, Chisato raised a finger as she made each point.

“First of all, for kendo. I knew of it beforehand, but I joined the kendo club because I looked up to you, Rei-sama.”

“It makes me happy to hear that.”

“And because I joined the kendo club I was able to make some good friends.”

She pictured the kendo club members in her mind. For whatever reason, Yoshino-san was in the middle, sulking.

“It’s a bit different to socializing with your classmates. Also.”

“There’s more?”

Chisato smiled and said ‘yeah.’

“The trademark short hair.”

Rei-sama had been smiling gently, but looked surprised when Chisato said this. This was Chisato’s punch-line, so not getting a laugh put her in a bit of a bind.

“Chisato-san, did you used to have long hair?”

...What?

“I wish I could have seen you like that.”

.....

As Rei-sama’s gentle smile returned, Chisato realized she wasn’t just feigning ignorance. Rei-sama really seemed to want to meet (for the first time) the long haired Chisato.

“I...”

Her whole body was quivering and shaking. Her voice was shaking too. But there was no way Chisato could leave it at this.

“I’m here as a representative of every student in this school, which means that I’m also a stand-in for Yoshino-san.”

“And?”

” – and therefore I’ll borrow her phrase, which is the most appropriate response in this situation.”

Chisato looked blankly at Rei-sama and lowered her voice, in acknowledgement that this wasn't the farewell you'd usually give to a graduating student.

” ‘Rei-chan you idiot.’ ”

Grand Entrance

Part 1.

“Well would you look at that.”

She spoke in a tone of wonder, after arriving out the front of the Lillian Girls Academy gates and seeing no-one else around.

“I’m the first one here.”

Quite an unusual occurrence.

Thinking that they may be waiting inside the gate instead of outside, she peeked inside but there was only an empty reception area, none of the people she was looking for.

She checked the messages on her mobile phone and, while she was at it, the time. 9:25am. And there were no messages from either Youko or Eriko.

“The graduation ceremony’s today, right?”

Taking a step backwards, she saw the plain white signboard with ‘High school graduation ceremony’ written in black letters hanging from the gate post on the right.

“I guess my invitation that we ‘might as well meet in front of the school gates tomorrow’ wasn’t explanation enough.”

– If it was something ordinary, they wouldn’t be able to make it. And knowing this, it was very much in Sei’s nature to add the ‘might as well’ to the invite.

“I wonder what time it starts.”

Sei thought it was probably 9:30 or 10:00, something like that. Oh, maybe it was 9:00? She had experienced it first-hand last year, but because it was so

long ago she'd completely forgotten.

Looking around at her quiet surroundings and the empty reception area, Sei changed her mind, thinking that a 10:00am start was unlikely.

So if we accept either theory of a 9:00 or 9:30am start, why weren't those two already here.

Or maybe they'd gone ahead of her.

No, no, in that case Youko's personality was such that she would have sent her a message. Although it wouldn't be such a bad thing if her personality had changed since starting university.

Well then, what should she do?

Sei started by sending a message to Youko, asking 'Where are you now?' and then loitered around, watching the gates. At any rate, she could think about what to do when she got the response.

“And Eriko – ”

It was a bit of a puzzle as to what she should do there. She hadn't originally been invited, so if she didn't show up no-one would say anything.

(But.)

From the way Yoshino-chan acted yesterday, it seemed as though she would like it if Eriko were invited.

(That's right.)

Because her reason for saying, “Invite Youko-sama too,” had been, “Wouldn't she want to see Sachiko-sama in her finest hour?” So you could interpret that as Yoshino-chan inviting Eriko, so that she could see Rei in her finest hour too. As for Sei, her petit soeur was still only a second year, so that clause didn't apply to her.

But when Sei thought about it, she realized that if only Eriko was here then she probably would have gone ahead of them. Since Eriko didn't know that she and Youko would also be here today.

After folding closed her mobile phone and putting it in her pocket, Sei felt something bumping against her legs.

“Oh!”

When Sei looked down, she saw a dark-brown striped cat circling around the cuff of her pants, rubbing its body against her legs.

“Goronta. It's you.”

Sei picked Goronta up and gently patted her. Goronta responded by purring happily.

“I never see you around the university campus, but you're always around here, huh?”

What a cute cat. Sei hadn't seen her in about a year, but Goronta didn't seem to have forgotten her.

“You've grown. You look like the boss cat now.”

Based on her weight, it looked like she was eating properly. Who knows, she might even be pregnant with mewling kittens. At the very least, it looked like she was able to fend for herself now. Sei was glad that the final result wouldn't anger Shimako-san.

“You're probably hunting birds and mice, I guess. Although you'll probably get given sausages or fried eggs from time to time.”

Well, you could probably call that a form of hunting too, so it was okay.

“You like it when I pat you here, don't you? Yeah, just like that.”

Sei had squatted down and was playing with Goronta when she heard an icy voice call out, ‘What are you doing?’ from above her. Just as expected,

when she turned around Youko was standing there.

“Oh.”

Sei had been absorbed in playing with Goronta and hadn't noticed that a bus had pulled up on the other side of the road and someone had walked across the pedestrian bridge.

“What do you mean, ‘Oh?’ And what were you thinking, I sent you message after message but you didn't respond to my question.”

“Huh?”

“Please stop making such idiotic responses.”

This was ... pretty bad.

“I deeply apologize. If your humble servant has been inept, please enlighten them, Lady Youko.”

“... You know I'm really furious.”

Youko took out her own cell phone, pressed a number of buttons and spoke as she looked at the display.

“Yesterday, without warning, I received a message saying, ‘Free tomorrow? Even if you're not, add this into your schedule and come. You'll probably see something interesting.’ You said to come, but where was I supposed to go. You should at least put the location in the message.”

“And then I sent you another message saying it was for the high school graduation.”

“But if I hadn't asked, you would have just left it like that, right. And anyway, saying that ‘we might as well meet in front of the school gates’ is hardly what you'd call making an appointment. I sent you a message saying, ‘When?’ and then waited and waited but you never sent me a response.

“Heh heh – my bad.”

At times like this, all you could do was apologize.

“And to top it all off, not too long ago I got a message asking, ‘Where are you now?’ Don’t you think that’s a bit unfair?”

While Youko was yammering on and looking at her mobile phone, Sei too took out her phone. Oops, she had three new messages. All from Youko.

Sei had put her phone into silent mode, so she hadn’t noticed their arrival. She probably should have noticed the vibration of the phone in her pocket but, unfortunately, she hadn’t felt it. Probably because she had been so absorbed in playing with Goronta.

Timidly, Sei read through the messages, starting with the oldest.

“Ahh – Youko’s at the train station.”

The first message said, “Now? I’m at K-station.”

“I am not. Right now I’m standing here in front of you.”

Indeed. The other two messages were, ‘Where are you?’ and ‘Has something happened? Please answer me.’

“If I were to send you a response saying, ‘I’m in front of the gates at Lillian’s Academy,’ you’d get mad, right?”

“...You’ve got some nerve, don’t you.”

If Sei were to push just a bit further, it seemed likely she would permanently damage their friendship. Since it seemed that Youko had left her house a bit earlier than normal to go to the train station, but upon seeing Sei’s message had assumed something bad had happened and hastily caught the bus here.

“Anyway, what’s up? You’re here quite early, aren’t you?”

Youko patted Goronta on the back as she said this. Goronta rarely let people pat her, but with Sei there she didn't seem to mind.

“Early? What time were you planning on arriving?”

Sei shook her head. If she hadn't sent that message it looked as though Youko wouldn't have arrived yet.

“What time indeed. Since you didn't bother to specify a meeting time, I figured you meant around lunchtime.”

Huh?

“Lunchtime? But wouldn't the graduation ceremony be over by then?”

As Sei was wondering what exactly Youko was saying, Youko was looking at her with an expression that implied she was thinking the same thing.

“Huh? So you were planning on going to the graduation ceremony?”

“You weren't?”

Youko and Sei looked at each other. Then they instinctively checked the time on their wristwatch and phone, respectively, before smiling wryly.

No matter how you look at it, the graduation ceremony would have already begun. Rendering their current conversation pointless.

“I see. Well, that explains why you're so well dressed.”

Youko said after closely examining Sei's appearance. Just like Youko had said, underneath her coat Sei wore a charcoal gray pant suit. Normally she'd wear the same coat when going to university, but it would be worn with a sweater, or a thick shirt, and a pair of jeans. But since she had planned on going to the graduation ceremony, she had decided against wearing jeans.

“Still, you should have put that in your message.”

Even though Youko wasn't expecting to attend the ceremony, she was still impeccably dressed. A black high-necked sweater and a gold necklace were peeking out from underneath the collar of her coat. Youko's skirt was hidden, so Sei couldn't tell what type it was, but she was wearing stockings and high-heels.

"Let's start at the beginning – why did you call me here? You said there'd be something interesting. Was that supposed to be the graduation ceremony? And why did you only ask yesterday when it's on today?"

Sei shrugged her shoulders at this rapid fire succession of questions.

"I don't know. Yoshino-chan only invited me yesterday. And she asked me to invite you too."

As expected, Youko was astonished by her response. What's Yoshino-chan got to do with any of this? Well, that's a fair question.

"I'd be able to see something interesting? She said that? Yoshino-chan?"

"Nope. That was my own prediction based on what I thought would happen."

"Hmmm."

After thinking about this for a short while, Youko said:

"In that case, I think we should wait until the graduation ceremony's over and see them when they're all together. Since it's Yoshino-chan, she's not going to do anything to get a laugh during the graduation ceremony. She'll take that very seriously. So it's not going to be all that interesting."

"Really? Last year's graduation ceremony was pretty interesting, right?"

Sei whistled innocently.

The students' representative had started sobbing as she was reading the farewell address, at which point a hero had appeared from somewhere in the

gymnasium to rescue her. Then, together, they were able to safely finish reading the address. Something like that.

“What would someone who was half asleep at the time know about that?”

Youko prodded Sei lightly on the forehead with her finger. She understood that the ‘interesting event’ from last year concerned her petit soeur, Sachiko, so she changed the topic.

“And? What about Eriko? She probably thought that you meant for us to meet after the graduation ceremony was over, too.”

“Probably not, since she wasn’t invited.”

“Huh? Why not?”

For the second time today, Mizuno Youko was astonished. She had obviously thought that since she was invited Eriko would also have been invited. Even after a whole year had passed, perhaps even for the rest of their lives, she seemed to view the three of them as inseparably bound together as one group.

“Even so, I think she’ll probably come.”

Goronta walked off, finally tiring of people patting her.

“Was that also something Yoshino-chan said?”

“She didn’t say it, but...”

Sei looked up at the sky.

“It’s just a feeling I get.”

Part 2.

“It’s just a feeling I get.”

Youko found herself intuitively agreeing with Sei's assurance. Eriko would probably come. No, make that definitely.

"She'll come, but I don't want to just idly wait around for her."

Youko took out her mobile phone and typed in a message. Of course it was to Eriko. Are you really coming today? We're at the school gates right now, where are you? We should probably meet up, but how are things on your end? These things could be said more concisely, but that wasn't in her nature.

The response from Eriko was almost immediate. It wasn't a message, but a direct call.

"Oh, didn't Yoshino-chan say that we were to meet after the ceremony was over?"

Eriko was still at home. Of course.

"You two should go inside. I'll be coming in through the back gate."

"Oh, that's right. Okay."

Eriko's house was closer to the school's back gate. When she was at school, Youko had taken that information as a given but now that it was no longer part of her daily routine, it seemed to have slipped her mind.

"So, anyway, how about you wait near the statue of Maria-sama until I arrive. Although I hate to keep you waiting like this."

"It's alright. Take your time."

Youko ended the call and turned around. Sei was still looking upwards.

"What's up?"

This time it wasn't the sky. Sei's gaze seemed to be a bit lower than that. Probably at a branch of the plum tree planted beside the bus stop. A light pink flower was blooming.

“A bird.”

“Bird?”

“A warbler was chirping tweet-tweet-tweet as it pecked at a flower. Fascinating.”

“...”

In that case it was probably a white-eye. Despite liking animals and plants, Sei was disinterested in their names or species. In much the same way that Youko had trouble remembering names and faces because she wasn't interested in using them to classify people.

“Eriko said we should go inside.”

Youko thought that as long as she could remember her friends, it was fine.

“Did she say she was coming?”

Sei's upward looking face returned to its normal position.

“She said she was coming.”

It would have been inexcusable for Youko to laugh at such an innocent looking face.

Passing through the main gates they entered into a reception area where two desks and chairs were set up, with a student receptionist at each one. One was resting her chin on her hands, the other was stifling a yawn.

They probably would have been more energetic, and accompanied by other students, during peak hour. Since there would be hardly anyone arriving now, they had probably reduced the number of students rostered on.

“Huh.”

When the girls at the reception desk saw the faces of the people standing before them, they were so surprised they jumped up. That wasn't a figure of speech. Their backsides literally left the chairs.

“Ro, Rosa...!”

Except for the first years, everyone probably still remembered the faces of Youko and Sei.

“The former ones.”

They were no longer high school seniors. So they no longer had an obligation to correct students if they were resting their chin on their hands, or stifling a yawn. While they didn't have an obligation, it wasn't in Youko's nature to let this pass. Thankfully, the students corrected their behavior voluntarily. Youko felt like she was getting dragged back into the past.

Sei showed her Lillian's Girls University student card and Youko signed in with her name and address before they passed through the reception area. Even though they had arrived at such a half-baked time, the reason they weren't questioned was probably because they were graduates. No, wait, they were questioned. The middle school teacher Aota-sensei had been talking to the security guard, and, upon seeing them, had asked, ‘How are you going?’ and ‘How's university?’

“This takes me back.”

Sei said as they walked along the path lined with ginkgo trees.

“Even though you go to Lillian's university?”

“I've walked in a little way past the gates, but I haven't been this far along the path.”

“I see.”

“And if I have some reason to visit the high school area, I can just take the path from the university buildings.”

Ahh, so that's how it is. Maybe it would be a little bit embarrassing too. That's understandable.

You would seem a little bit out of place, to be walking along this long road wearing something other than a school uniform.

During special events, like the athletics festival, or the school carnival, or the graduation ceremony, it was a trifling matter. But on an ordinary day, Youko thought that it would be an incredibly strong sensation.

“You're praying?”

Sei asked Youko, as she clasped her hands together in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

“Yeah.”

Even though Youko had graduated, it would be strange to suddenly stop. She didn't pray at home, either at morning or night, but she had no reason not to pray when in front of the statue of Maria-sama. Much the same as she would pray when in front of an altar at a Shinto shrine.

“You once told me that your family grave site was in a Buddhist temple, Youko. And to make matters worse, you came to Lillian's at the start of middle school.”

“What do you mean, to make matters worse?”

Sei probably wanted to say that her Christianity was a convenience. Well, Youko couldn't really deny it.

“Even at university there's people like that. Every day during lunch, they'll voluntarily go out and pray. But they're not the same type of person as Shimako, it seems like they're doing it out of inertia. A habit, if you like. If they don't pray, they'll feel bad. That kind of thing.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

There's probably a lot of Japanese people like that. Even the pious Shimako probably prays in the Buddhist temple when she gets home.

"Well then, what should we do?"

Eriko had said she didn't want to keep them waiting, but it would probably take her 5 to 10 minutes to arrive since she had still been at home.

"How about we take a stroll over there?"

That should be okay, as long as they didn't go too far.

"Ahh, wait up."

Sei called out to Youko, who had started to walk off. Youko was wondering what that was all about and turned around to see Sei standing in front of the statue of Maria-sama and praying.

"You're praying."

Somewhat surprised, Youko called out in wonder.

"Oh, it's nothing."

Sei said, seemingly uneasy. Youko had known Sei for a long time, but still didn't really understand her.

"Well, let's go then."

Having finished her prayer, Sei walked down a different path to the one Youko had been heading down.

"Wait, where are you going?"

Youko hurriedly stopped Sei by grabbing her elbow. For someone seemingly without any destination in mind, Sei had had an impish grin on her face when she had said, 'Let's go.'

"Well... look."

Youko stepped in without waiting to hear Sei's admission.

"We can't go to the gymnasium."

"It'll be fine. We'll just take a peek."

Youko had been spot on. Sei had been planning on going to watch the graduation ceremony.

"No means no."

There was no way they could 'just take a peek.' If that was allowed, they wouldn't have receptionists and security stationed at all the entrances. That was why Eriko's boyfriend (what was his name? that goofy guy) had been allowed onto the school grounds last year, but wasn't allowed in to see the graduation ceremony.

"Then we'll march straight in."

Youko braced herself and put all her strength into stopping Sei's forward motion.

"Absolutely not."

If they went to the gymnasium, they would probably be allowed in once they were recognized. But people who arrive late are incredibly conspicuous, even if they take their seats quietly. That's okay for regular parents and relatives. But they would be recognized by most of the students and that would cause a small commotion. The small commotion would spread, leading to a huge disruption inside the gymnasium.

Youko couldn't let that happen.

Graduation ceremonies are dull events. And boring is fine. If the program progresses solemnly and without incident, then it's a huge success.

"I'm begging you, please don't disrupt my darling petit soeur's graduation ceremony."

The Problem of Adding “-San”

Part 1.

The graduation ceremony was proceeding solemnly inside the gymnasium, just as Youko had hoped.

“Take your seats.”

The voice of the vice-principal, who was leading the ceremony, was carried through the microphone and resounded throughout the auditorium.

With the singing of the Japanese national anthem just completed, everyone sat down in their seats as directed. Other than the rustling of clothes, there was also the sound of paper rubbing together, or being used as a fan but no hint of whispering. Print-outs that contained the words of the hymns to be sung during the middle section of proceedings had been placed on the guests seats prior to the commencement of the ceremony.

They were called hymns, but they weren’t particularly difficult. They had chosen famous songs that even those not well versed in Christianity would have heard before. So when they heard the introduction, they would remember the melody and be able to sing along by looking at the lyrics.

In amongst that rustling were her parents, Rei thought as she sat down.

Not just her parents, but Yoshino’s parents too. Rei’s uncle had taken a day of paid vacation just so he could watch his niece’s graduation ceremony. – Ahh, why would you do that?

(Normally it’s just your parents that come, right?)

However, the Hasekura and Shimazu families were like one family living under two roofs, so what general society considered ‘normal’ didn’t really apply to them.

(Four seats for the relatives of one graduating student.)

But then again, she had heard that last year her onee-sama, Torii Eriko-sama, had six people from her family there (and one person was detained outside the gymnasium and gave up on the idea of going inside) so she wasn't as bad as that.

(And that's not considering Mr and Mrs Torii, who came to see Yoshino.)

So this was okay. Rei set aside the issue of her aunt and uncle.

(More importantly.)

Rei moved on to thinking about what had happened with Chisato-chan. The usually meek and sunny Chisato-chan had suddenly sprouted fangs. How could that be explained?

(She said 'Rei-chan you idiot?' – Ahh)

It was certainly devastating to be called an idiot by someone other than Yoshino. Back then Chisato-chan had nonchalantly followed that up with, 'Excuse me' and had been smiling as she quickly departed, leaving behind Rei who was still frozen from the shock. Even now, Rei was still dumbfounded by it. And so, even though some time had passed, she kept coming back to it.

(Just what kind of an idiot am I?)

Of course, it had been impossible for the 'idiot Rei-chan' to ask why she had been called an 'idiot.'

And immediately before that, Chisato-chan had pinned the flower to her chest. The mood had started out gentle enough, with Chisato-chan expressing her gratitude.

(Then...)

Rei had absolutely no idea what had happened in the following one or two minutes. She thought Chisato-chan had said something about Yoshino, but –

.

(It's no good.)

Unfortunately, Rei couldn't remember anything more due to the shock of being called an idiot.

(Ahhh.)

Was this okay for the graduation ceremony?

Despite having a leading role, she just couldn't concentrate.

Then again.

Maybe it was okay for there to be one student like this, from the graduating class of about 230 people.

Part 2.

They were starting to hand out the diplomas.

To use a food analogy, the main dish had arrived. Which would make the national anthem they had just sung the soup. The scripture reading was the hors d'œuvre, and the opening speech was the apéritif. Although since over half of the people in this assembly were under the legal drinking age, this would have to be a non-alcoholic drink.

(... Why am I thinking about this?)

I'm surprisingly blasé about my own graduation ceremony, Sachiko thought as she sat in the area at the front of the gymnasium reserved for graduating students.

One by one the names of students from her grade were called, at which point they would walk on stage to receive their graduation certificate before

returning to their chair. It felt a bit like watching television, everything seemed distant.

There were probably some graduating students who were overcome with emotion and broke down in tears, but Sachiko couldn't see anyone like that around her.

If they were to start crying now, they probably wouldn't have the energy or strength to last until the end of the graduation ceremony. It's never explicitly stated, but the traditional time when an announcer could say, 'Okay, you can cry now,' would be towards the end of the Lillian Girl's Academy high school graduation ceremony, when the school song was about to be sung.

– In other words, crying during the farewell address was starting quite early.

(That's fine. I wasn't graduating last year.)

Even as she told herself this, Sachiko realized her mistake. Because now there was absolutely no way that she could cry prior to the farewell address.

(Oh no.)

Sachiko smiled bitterly. The classmate sitting beside her noticed this, and the edge of her lips turned fractionally upwards.

(Don't be silly. There's no way I'm going to cry.)

Yesterday, Sachiko had made a vow to Yumi. There was absolutely no way she was going to cry during the ceremony. Today's graduation ceremony was Sachiko's only chance to make amends for her failure last year. She'd be fine. Yumi was wearing that ribbon for her. And Sachiko could relax, knowing that Yumi was looking after a piece of her heart.

And yet, despite it being her own graduation ceremony, Sachiko couldn't concentrate on the ceremony. Come to think of it, her onee-sama had also said something like that. That in the middle of the graduation ceremony, she found herself remembering things from long ago.

“Third year chrysanthemum group.”

Sachiko heard the vice-principal’s voice coming through the microphone. She raised her head. This was Rei’s class. It also meant that they had already finished handing out the graduation certificates to two classes.

Rei’s family name was Hasekura, so it would be a little while before it was her turn. Family names probably don’t have the same distribution amongst the alphabet as ordinary words, but starting with ‘Ha’ put it about two-thirds of the way through the alphabet.

Hasekura Rei. It’s a good name, Sachiko thought.

They’d both attended Lillian’s since kindergarten, so it was inevitable that they would meet. And before Sachiko was aware of it, she knew Rei’s face and name, and could converse with her if necessary. All the while the years kept passing by. They had probably been in the same class numerous times, although she couldn’t remember when. Sachiko hadn’t paid much attention to who her classmates were, so events from years past hadn’t really stuck in her memory.

Sachiko wondered when she first became aware of Rei’s existence.

(... Oh.)

Thinking back on it, Sachiko felt as though they hadn’t had much contact until they both became a bouton’s petit soeur.

(But.)

Sachiko had a good impression of Rei when she saw her. She couldn’t find a suitable word to describe it, but something close to ‘admiration’ was mixed in there.

Perhaps a simile would be good. Right, a sapling that grows upwards, directly towards the sun. Rei was that kind of radiant being.

Rei’s presence was gentle and fresh, never cliquy or two-faced. It always felt like she was surrounded by clear air, or pure water.

That was how Rei always was, both in appearance and on the inside.

Years ago, Sachiko had been momentarily captivated by the beauty of one of the girls in her grade as they performed the long jump. Revisiting the memory, there was no doubting that girl was Rei.

Each individual scene was brief but shining, and Sachiko's memories of Rei could be strung together like the beads in a rosary to produce something eternally sparkling.

(I'd never say this to Yumi, but I probably have a weakness for the honest and straightforward type.)

Speaking of Yumi, there was that question she had asked some time ago.

"Onee-sama, when did you and Rei-sama start calling each other by just your given name?"

It was probably still on Yumi's mind, as to this day she was still using the '-san' honorific when addressing Yoshino-chan and Shimako.

"Let's see.... At some point, it just felt like the natural thing to do."

That had been her answer at the time, although truthfully Sachiko remembered it precisely.

* * *

"Ah, Sachiko..."

Rei said, blushing.

It was coming into June or July, the first semester of their first year, and not long after they had both been made the petit soeur of a bouton. The location was the second floor of the Rose Mansion. It was after school, and the two

first years were preparing tea or doing something similar. They hadn't really been chatting until Rei suddenly opened her mouth.

“Ye-s?”

Sachiko was surprised that the ‘-san’ honorific had been omitted, although her external appearance remained unchanged.

“Umm, ahh, what was it?”

Rei was flailing. It was obvious that it had taken all of Rei's nerve for her to be able to call out ‘Sachiko’ and she had completely forgotten what she had planned to talk about.

So the important thing wasn't what followed Rei's initial statement, but the use of ‘Sachiko’ itself.

The specifics weren't clear, but Sachiko could tell that Rei would crumble if she were to be teased about her use of ‘Sachiko.’ Removing the honorific ‘-san’ from a name is akin to removing the training wheels from a bicycle, so there's an understandable sense of insecurity that accompanies it.

“I...”

Sachiko said, referencing the start of their conversation.

“Wonder what would go well with black-tea cookies or teacakes.”

Sachiko hadn't intended it as a life-preserver. However, she couldn't stand to see Rei so flustered and silent.

“Huh?”

Rei seemed to have every single hole in her face wide open as she looked at Sachiko.

“Having coffee with them might be a bit questionable. Green tea is a definite no.”

Sachiko looked away, and silently started to make some tea. Black tea was normally served in the Rose Mansion, unless a special request had been made. Anyway, it was not like they had any sweets prepared for today. So the black-tea cookies were merely a hypothetical. And if they did have black-tea cookies, there was absolutely no way they would be openly discussing it like this. That would likely earn them a scolding from their seniors, who themselves had been responsible for preparing the tea in previous years.

“Well, what do you think would go well with them?”

Even though she asked this of Rei, Sachiko answered her own question after thinking about it for a short while.

“Warm milk.”

“Warm milk? Ahh.”

Rei nodded, as though brought back to life.

“What do you think, Rei?”

Sachiko thought it was proper that she should refer to Rei without an honorific. If she were to address her as ‘Rei-san’ now, or to continue using that in the future, Rei would start to doubt herself. She would then probably return to using ‘Sachiko-san,’ making the initial ‘Sachiko’ pointless. Even though Sachiko had made up her mind, saying it still made her blush.

It was too perfect.

Even though it was couched in terms of a conversation about black-tea and cookies, it could only be interpreted as a conversation about personal preference.

“Is it okay if I agree with your opinion, Sachiko?”

Rei said. This time around, there wasn’t even the slightest shake when she said ‘Sachiko.’

“You’re okay with warm milk?”

“For now. Although, I don’t think I’d be able to find anything better.”

“Then it’s settled.”

Having heard the back-and-forth, their onee-samas chuckled, and asked, ‘What are you talking about that’s so interesting?’

It was strange that she could still remember that Satou Sei-sama, who was usually moody and rarely visited the Rose Mansion, had been there, and the burst of laughter from her when she realized the significance of their conversation.

* * *

(Even so.)

Sachiko pondered, as she idly watched the graduation certificates being awarded. What made Rei think of changing the way she addressed her back then? Up until that point, Rei had always followed the convention at Lillian’s by addressing Sachiko, who was in the same year as her, with the honorific ‘-san.’

And although Sachiko didn’t object to being called without an honorific, no-one else had adopted Rei’s way of addressing her.

(Oh well, maybe I should ask her about that.)

It’s not like Rei was going to return to awkwardly addressing her as ‘Sachiko-san’ after all this time.

“Hasekura Rei.”

Sachiko’s dear friend took a step forward onto the stage to receive her graduation certificate.

Part 3.

Having received her graduation certificate and resumed her seat amongst the third year chrysanthemum class, Rei thought:

That was fast.

The graduation certificates they were given on stage were collected again as they stepped off the stage, leaving her hands currently empty. It was reminiscent of the hollow feeling she had.

Actually, her onee-sama had said a similar thing about her own graduation ceremony. That she had felt hollow, couldn't concentrate, worried about other things and remembered all kinds of events during the ceremony – as though the actual graduation was happening to someone else.

It was exactly like she had said. And so, for those graduating students who had received their diploma and had no further role to play in the ceremony, 95% of them looked at peace.

“Third year pine group.”

It was Sachiko's class's turn.

Because Ogasawara started with an 'O', Sachiko would be called fairly early.

“Ogasawara Sachiko.”

Well, there you go. It was her turn already.

There were a lot of things that were done in alphabetical order at school, and Rei usually thought it must be tough getting called early as you wouldn't have time to prepare yourself.

In that regard, ‘Hasekura’ was closer to the end than the middle, so she was called earlier when they did things in reverse alphabetical order, but she was in the fortunate position of always being able to watch what the front-runners did and copy them. Although it did mean she usually had to wait a while, which could get boring.

As Sachiko strode onto the stage, scattered sighs of admiration could be heard throughout the gymnasium.

Sachiko was beautiful even without the rose-tinted glasses that accompanied their close friendship. Her natural figure shone with the light of the proud and intelligent soul it housed. Recently, this had been joined by a kindness and tenderness that polished her beauty even further. This was probably Yumi-chan’s influence. No matter who’s eyes you were watching it through, Sachiko was the epitome of an onee-sama at Lillian’s Girls Academy.

Sachiko received her graduation certificate and stepped down from the stage. Once more, the sighs rang out. As though show-time was over. It was a bit unfortunate for the next student.

They had both been at Lillian’s since kindergarten, but Rei had no recollection of talking privately with Sachiko prior to high school. Ever since kindergarten, Sachiko had an aura about her that was different to the other students – it was as though she was already a lady. Back then, Rei hadn’t known what it meant to be a lady and instead thought of Sachiko as the school’s sole princess. The polar opposite of herself, who had brandished the shinai ever since she became aware of it. Sachiko moved with an elegant grace that was attributed to her ballet lessons.

An incredibly pretty little girl.

Rei was intrigued by Sachiko, but didn’t know how to go about becoming friends with her. The other kindergarteners probably felt the same way too – turned away by the atmosphere surrounding Sachiko that made her hard to know, they either kept their distance and merely watched, or spread malicious rumors about her because they didn’t know how else to cope. As a result, Sachiko was often alone. The current Rei would have called out to

Sachiko and played with her, but the Rei back then hadn't been as mature and had revered the solitary Sachiko as an 'independent woman.' Of course, Rei only learned this phrase much later.

During elementary school and middle school they had been in the same class numerous times, but Sachiko still remained a 'pretty princess' to Rei. Eventually, Rei learned that Sachiko was the daughter of the president of a huge corporation, and realized that Sachiko really was a princess.

And a princess doesn't laugh out loud, or assemble cliques. It wasn't because Sachiko was being disagreeable, but because this was what she was earnestly striving for.

(Which reminds me.)

There was something that Yoshino had asked her a while ago. 'When did you start addressing Sachiko-sama without an honorific? She's a princess, so she wouldn't think of addressing you like that, right?'

Certainly, it had taken a lot of courage to first call her 'Sachiko.' After all, you were talking to a 'princess.'

"That's harsh. I started because that's how she was addressing me. When we were both bouton's petit soeurs I was still calling her Sachiko-san."

That was how she had answered, but it wasn't the truth. Well, she was the first to be addressed without an honorific, but it wasn't really said to her face.

— In other words, it was... one of those things.

* * *

Rei could clearly remember the day she went from watching Sachiko from a distance to being much closer to her.

It was May and the welcoming ceremony organized by the Yamayurikai had just finished. Rei was in her classroom, that of the first year chrysanthemum group, when her onee-sama-to-be, Torii Eriko-sama, approached her out of the blue, and said:

“Will you be my petit soeur?”

Since she was being asked by Rosa Foetida en bouton, Rei probably would have refused if she was allowed to sleep on it. Instead, she was pressed for an immediate answer and responded in the affirmative. Over-thinking tended to dull her animal instincts. Rei’s intuition told her that it would be fun to be with Eriko-sama, and on this account it wasn’t wrong.

Rei was dragged out of the classroom and told that she was going to be introduced to Eriko-sama’s companions before the presentation of the rosary. As they walked through the corridors holding hands, Rei became hesitant when she realized who Eriko-sama’s companions were, and where she was being taken.

Eriko-sama’s onee-sama, Rosa Foetida, would be waiting. Not only her, but Rosa Gigantea and Rosa Chinensis would probably be there as well.

Until then, Rei had only looked up at the Roses as they stood atop the summit of the high school student council and aspired to be like them. She hadn’t yet had time to prepare herself. Even her feelings about becoming Rosa Foetida en bouton’s petit soeur seemed to have been left behind in the corridor outside her classroom and replaced with anticipation.

“Oh.”

Eriko-sama came to a halt. They were in front of the Rose Mansion.

“What’s this, I wonder.”

That came from Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Mizuno Youko-sama.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about Rosa Chinensis en bouton being near the Rose Mansion. The same could be said for Eriko-sama, since

she was Rosa Foetida en bouton. So the reason the two boutons were looking at each other with expressions of surprise was due to the inclusion of some additional factor. Rei got it. Youko-sama was surprised because she was looking at Rei, standing beside Eriko-sama. And Eriko-sama was –

She recognized the first year student that was standing behind Youko-sama. It was Ogasawara Sachiko.

Eriko-sama was looking at Sachiko, who was staring back at her. Sachiko's gaze then shifted to Rei, who was still holding hands with Eriko-sama.

Their eyes met.

“Huh.”

The small sound came out of Sachiko's mouth for an instant. Then she started to smile, like a flower blossoming.

When she thought about it, Rei supposed that it was probably a forced smile, but even so it had impressed her greatly at the time. That was because Rei could only stand there with her mouth agape, lacking the composure to smile. But you'd expect that behavior from a princess.

At any rate, they both became the petit soeur of a bouton at roughly the same time.

The introduction to Eriko-sama's companions wasn't as nerve wracking as Rei had expected. Because there were two of them, the amount of attention they each received was halved. It wasn't as though her teeth were chattering together. But with Sachiko beside her, Rei was able to stand tall.

It wasn't that Rei was concerned about a comparison between the two of them. Instead, she felt a joy at being able to stand next to Sachiko, rather than just watching her from afar. Standing next to Sachiko, it was as though they both wanted to see themselves reflected in each others eyes.

That was probably a premonition.

Rei seemed to sense, with something other than the five usual senses, a vision of their future selves, and their invaluable friendship.

On that day, the five existing inhabitants of the Rose Mansion welcomed the two new arrivals with a toast of strawberry milk. From memory, Rosa Gigantea en bouton, Satou Sei-sama, had grumbled about being made to go and buy the milk. Why was she, as a second year student, being penalized with these menial tasks now that they had some first year students.

Thinking back on it, that was probably the penalty that Sei had earned by coming last in the race to find a petit soeur.

Well, that was how Rei's life as the petit soeur of a bouton started, but it didn't mean that she became close friends with Sachiko straight away.

At first Sachiko naturally used the honorific '-san' when addressing her, saying things like, 'Rei-san, can you pass me that,' or 'Rei-san, this happened while you were at your club.' Sachiko may have been a princess, but she went to great efforts to be a good petit soeur for Rosa Chinensis en bouton. Completing her chores without complaining. Never unwilling to participate in cleaning. Instead, she would actively participate. And the quality of her work was outstanding.

Compared to Rei, who would occasionally skip going to the Rose Mansion due to club activities, Sachiko worked harder. And silently, as though she were in serious training.

Then one day, Rei's kendo practice ended early because the martial arts building that they usually used for training was unavailable due to repair work. So she cheerfully headed off to the Rose Mansion. Today she'd be able to do all of the chores she usually missed. And appearing on a day when she normally had club activities would probably make her onee-sama happy too.

Opening the 'biscuit door' to the second floor clubroom, Rei saw Sachiko, Eriko-sama and Rosa Gigantea. The three of them were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice Rei. She should have walked in

and greeted them all with a ‘Gokigenyou.’ In fact, she started to do just that. But she was stopped when she heard the words that Sachiko spoke next:

“I don’t think Rei’s doing anything wrong.”

(I’m doing something wrong?)

No, that wasn’t it. Sachiko had stood up for her, denying that she was doing anything wrong.

“Then what could the problem be? Our pigheadedness?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Certainly, there’s a slight problem with Rei, but it’s such a trivial matter. That’s what I was saying.”

(Problem? Am I failing in my duties as a bouton’s petit soeur because of my club activities? But my onee-sama said it was fine if I just did what I could for the Yamayurikai –)

That was certainly playing on Rei’s mind, but there was another matter that had captured her attention.

(Did she just call me ‘Rei,’ without an honorific?)

“You’re not going in?”

Right at that moment, someone called out to her from behind.

“Uwaah.”

“What a strange greeting, from the giant pipsqueak.”

Rei turned around, and standing there was Satou Sei-sama. But what kind of a name was ‘giant pipsqueak?’

“Oh, Rei. You’re here?”

Eriko-sama turned around. She was quite composed given that the person they had just been gossiping about had suddenly appeared. In comparison,

Rei was considerably more flustered.

“Ah, yeah.”

Sachiko and Rosa Gigantea were much the same as Eriko-sama.

“Gokigenyou, Rei-san.”

“...Gokigenyou.”

“Come inside, Rei-chan. And while you’re at it, bring the person behind you in too..... Heheh, I see you’ve finally made it here, Sei.”

“You’d sue me for breach of contract if I didn’t show my face around here from time to time.”

Sei-sama grinned as she made her way past Rei, who was still holding the door knob, to Rosa Gigantea’s side. The usually grumpy person seemed to be in a good mood today.

Sachiko was clearing some documents off the table so Rei put her bags down and went to prepare the tea. The electric kettle was making that swishing sound that indicated it was ready.

As Rei was adding the tea leaves to the tea pot, she was thinking back to what Sachiko had just said.

Maybe she had misheard it.

“Hey, Rei-chan.”

“Uwaah.”

When she turned around, Satou Sei-sama was there once more.

“The greeting doesn’t change, huh.”

“I’m sorry.”

The junior wondered what they were apologizing for as they offered up the words of excuse. Please forgive me, excuse me, I'm sorry, pardon me, etc. etc.

“You noticed it, just before, right?”

“What do you mean?”

Rei tried to temporize, but it was probably futile. Sei-sama had been right behind her at the biscuit door. It wasn't that she had heard anything Rei hadn't, but that she had seen how Rei had been too shocked to enter the room.

“The lack of honorifics.”

“Huh?”

“That were used. By prinny²-pipsqueak.”

This is supposed to be a nonsense word derived from princess.

Sei-sama turned around. Sachiko was standing with her back to them, talking to Rosa Chinensis, who had just arrived.

“Are you talking about Sachiko-san?”

Sei-sama was just making up names, like giant pipsqueak and prinny pipsqueak, so it was hard to follow what she was saying. The convention at Lillian's Girls Academy was to append '-sama' to the name of girls in higher grades and '-san' to the name of girls in the same grade. Girls in a lower grade were usually addressed with '-san' or '-chan,' although if you were especially close you could use no honorific.

“Ohhh? The giant pipsqueak is sticking with ‘Sachiko-san’.”

“Can you please stop calling me ‘giant pipsqueak.’”

“In that case, I think I’ll call you ‘Rei’ without an honorific. If it’s good enough for prinny-pipsqueak, it’s good enough for me, don’t you think?”

“...Do as you please.”

When she was in a bad mood, Satou Sei-sama was eerily scary. Although Rei didn’t want to get much closer to her now that she was in a good mood either. Rei thought the ‘stay away glare’ that the foul tempered Sei-sama menaced people with was actually a form of kindness.

“But, ya know, there’s a bit of a disparity.”

Rei was in the middle of pouring a cup of tea when Sei-sama said this. It seemed their conversation wasn’t over just yet.

“You’re both in the same year and both petit soeurs of a bouton. Yet one of you uses an honorific and the other doesn’t. You’d just want to make sure it doesn’t have an impact on your standing, and who has the power in the relationship.”

Rei was reeling slightly from that suggestion. The Yamayurikai was about the three colored Roses joining together to lead the students, so there shouldn’t be any power struggles, right?

“Pardon me. Rei-san, I’ll help out.”

Sachiko called out and made her way over to them.

“Ahh, it’s okay. You usually have to do everything, Sachiko-san, so while I’m here I should do this. Although it probably won’t taste as good as yours.”

After Rei turned to face Sachiko and replied, Sei-sama chimed in from beside her.

“Don’t worry, I’m supervising so it’ll turn out okay.”

“I wasn’t worried at all.”

Sachiko turned her back, apparently offended.

“She used ‘-san’.”

While Rei resumed pouring the tea into the cups, Sei wagged the index finger of her left hand back and forth and said, ‘No no no.’

“That’s because it’s hard to say it to someone’s face. But don’t you think she really wants you two to address each other in that way?”

“She wants to?”

“See Rei, about Sachiko. Even though she wants to, her pride keeps her from saying it. You get it?”

Is that so?

Rei looked at Sachiko’s back once more. Sachiko didn’t notice, she was talking to Youko-sama now.

In that case.

Maybe Rei should try calling her ‘Sachiko’ from now on.

It wouldn’t be possible today, so tomorrow.

It was a fairly high hurdle, but if she could clear it then maybe they could have a relationship more like their onee-samas.

‘Youko’ ‘Eriko’ ‘Sei’.

It was wonderful how they called each other by just their given name.

Part 4.

“Sei.”

The ‘big-headed’ girl waved to the ‘American’ girl as she approached the statue of Maria-sama, which was located at the fork in the path lined with ginkgo trees.

“Ahh, Eriko.”

Youko, who had noticed her first, waved back. Sei took a quick glance in her direction, then her shoulders started to shake as she frantically tried to keep herself from laughing, leaving her unable to return the greeting.

“What’s this about?”

Eriko asked, pointing at the strange figure that was hunched over and gently oscillating. Youko shrugged, seemingly uninterested.

“Who knows?”

“Huh? You were with her, right?”

Eriko asked, after first praying at the statue of Maria-sama. She had nothing to pray for, it was purely for form’s sake.

“I was with her. But then she suddenly started smiling. I have no idea why.”

Youko looked at Sei coldly.

“Just out of the blue? Well that’s strange.”

Eriko glanced at Sei, who was making a spluttering sound as though her throat had gone into convulsions. Finally, she burst into laughter, clutching her stomach and with tears streaming down her face.

“Before I arrived, she didn’t happen to eat some mushrooms from the side of the road? Some magic mushrooms?”

“It’s scary to think what she’d be like if she did.”

The two friends folded their arms and said, ‘Hmmm.’ Why on earth did the younger girls think this was a ‘good student’ back when they were still at

school. It was a mystery.

Eventually, Sei's waves of laughter subsided and she called out to Eriko and Youko, who were still standing back and watching her from a distance.

"Come, come, gather around fair maidens."

"Huh?"

"And I'll regale you with a comedic tale."

A comedic tale? What's she blathering on about, oblivious to the performance she just put on.

"Like I was saying before, you're being quite strange. What was so funny?"

"Sorry, sorry. I was just laughing at something I remembered."

In that case it must have been something incredibly hilarious. Normally you'd just snicker at a memory. Eriko looked doubtfully at Sei, who managed to suppress her laughter as she looked back this time.

"So what was it?"

Sei was really starting to grate on Eriko's nerves. Well, they had quarreled with each other from the start. Mainly that was because they both wanted different things.

"Your petit soeur."

Sei said.

"Rei? What happened to her?"

"The misunderstanding that led to her addressing Sachiko without an honorific... heheheh."

"What are you talking about?"

Eriko grabbed Sei by the collar and said, ‘Speak clearly.’ Sei was smiling as she continued.

“I dunno when it was, but you and Sachiko and someone else, well, anyway, do you remember chatting in the Rose Mansion about something.”

“How am I supposed to remember anything based on such a vague description?”

Eriko was still gritting her teeth, but the corners of her lips turned upwards as she spoke.

She couldn’t remember when, couldn’t remember who and to top it all off they were at the Rose Mansion, chatting. That left nothing to search on. There were probably a few hundred separate occasions that matched those criteria.

“It wasn’t long after Rei and Sachiko started coming to the Rose Mansion. Right, right, you were trying to solve some problem. I think it came from a magazine – they were a bit of a fad within our grade – solve the puzzle and you’d win a prize.”

“Ahh.”

Eriko let go of Sei’s collar as she remembered that something of that sort had happened. Although she was talking about something that happened a long time ago.

“So what does that have to do with our petit soeurs?”

This time it was Youko asking, somewhat forcibly. That was to be expected. It was different when it was just Rei, but now that Sachiko’s name had been mentioned there was no way she would stay quiet. Sei continued, after giving a knowing smile.

“I wasn’t there at the start, so I don’t know all the details, but it looked like you were getting Sachiko to do one of those problems. Because the

magazine was open on the table. And then Sachiko got all agitated about it, right?”

“Sachiko was agitated...”

Eriko could feel the memory creeping back, bit by bit. She definitely remembered that the seemingly quiet Sachiko had been saying exactly what she had been thinking for the puzzle, so she had been deliberately saying the opposite in order to provoke a reaction from Sachiko. Although, unfortunately, Eriko couldn't recall how it had ended.

“And there was some argument about how to solve it.”

“There probably was. Although I can't remember it.”

Maybe if it was something said during a meeting, but Eriko didn't keep minutes or a record of everything that was said when she was just chatting.

“And Rei heard Sachiko talking about this, and thought she was talking about her.”

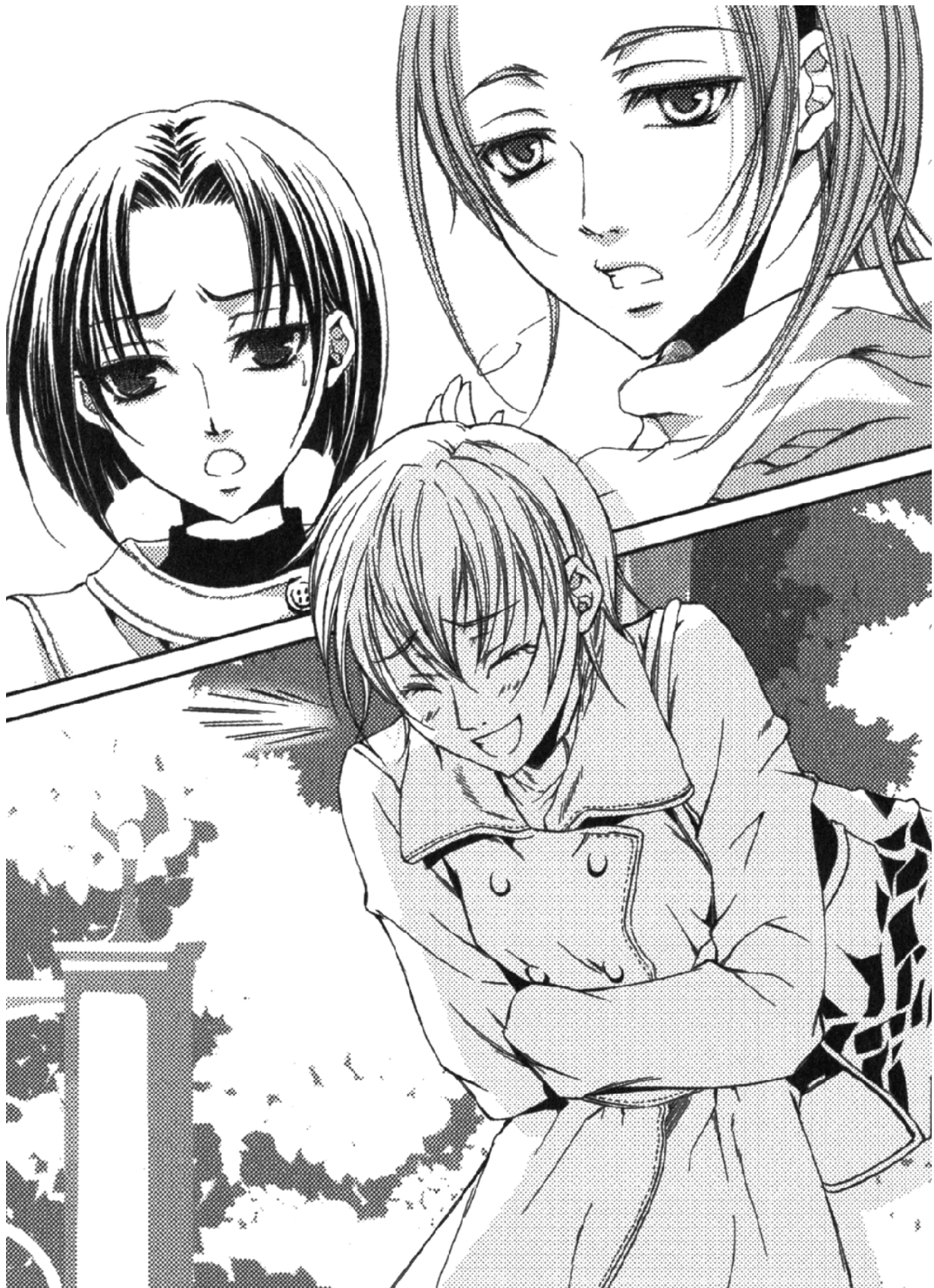
“Huh?”

“She misheard something like, ‘The way you're doing this is wrong,’ for ‘Rei's doing something wrong.’³ It was brilliant. See, she was under the impression that Sachiko was calling her just by her name. So she should do the same.”

The pronunciation for the two sentences is identical in Japanese.

“Say what?”

“Sachiko must have been surprised. That Rei was suddenly calling her without an honorific. Although she recovered pretty quickly, and they've been like that ever since. Pretty funny, don't you think?”





Sei laughed, and it appeared as though she would succumb to the waves of hysteria once more. As for the onee-samas of the two people involved, they looked at each other with expressions of disbelief.

“And you didn’t think to inform Rei of this when you realized it?”

Youko asked.

“What would I tell her? The funny story?”

Sei responded, poker-faced.

“I see. You egged Rei on, didn’t you. Telling her to call Sachiko, ‘Sachiko.’”

“Would I do that?”

Looking at Sei’s smiling face, Eriko started to doubt her own beliefs. About what type of senior Sei had been. Although it was too shocking to put into words.

No, it was Youko that spoke next.

“...Yes. That’s exactly what you’d do.”

She said.

Parting Gift Trio

Part 1.

“The farewell address.”

The vice-principal announced.

“The students’ representative, second year wisteria class, Toudou Shimako.”

Shimako acknowledged her name with a ‘Here’ and rose from her chair.

Sitting in front of her, Katsura-san turned around and whispered, ‘Good luck.’ Her fellow classmates smiled at her as she walked by, and Shimako nodded to them as she made her way to the aisle that split the neat rows of chairs.

The gymnasium’s stage was straight in front of her.

It was Shimako’s duty to take that stage and to deliver a speech that would send forth the graduating seniors.

Her heartbeat gradually picked up pace.

Shimako took a deep breath, then slowly started to walk forwards. There was no turning back now. When she next walked down this path, it would be after she had completed her important duty. Then she would be going in the opposite direction, returning to her seat.

When she reached the aisle that signalled the boundary between the graduating seniors and the remaining students, Shimako once more came to a halt.

With approximately 450 current students at her back, Shimako looked out over the graduating class.

Maria-sama, please look after them.

Keep them from harm.

Unusually, Shimako made a direct request of Maria-sama. Probably because of the pressure associated with this task. – The pressure on Shimako, that is.

* * *

“Ahh, Toudou-san.”

It was the middle of February, and afternoon homeroom had just finished. Her homeroom teacher had been on the verge of leaving the classroom when she called out to Shimako, asking, ‘Do you have a moment?’

“Yes.”

Her teacher was waiting with one foot in the classroom and one foot in the hallway. If the door were to remain open too long her classmates that were still in the classroom would get cold, so Shimako hurried over. Although that situation would be unavoidable. It was almost time for cleaning, and all the windows in the classroom would be thrown open.

“When you’ve finished cleaning, please go and see Yamamura-sensei.”

“Hmm?”

“She’ll be waiting for you in the staff room.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“No.”

“Okay then, I’ll leave you to it.”

Having concisely delivered the message, her homeroom teacher walked briskly down the hallway. Shimako bowed at the departing figure, when a voice that came from right beside her ear suddenly inquired:

“What did our teacher want?”

“Augh.”

Shimako’s heart leapt in her chest, but her body didn’t follow so she had managed to partially suppress her surprise. Even so, how long has she been there? Shimako looked to her side, and her classmate Katsura-san was waiting for her response.

“She told me to go to the staff room when I had finished cleaning. That Yamamura-sensei would be waiting there.”

There was nothing particularly secret about what Shimako had been told, so she responded openly. Her homeroom teacher had probably thought it better not to announce it in front of the whole class. If it was something secret, Shimako’s teacher probably would have taken her somewhere else to tell her. But there was really no need for secrecy when the message was simply that Yamamura-sensei had asked for her to come to the staff room.

“Why?”

Katsura-san shook her head.

“Who knows...”

Shimako shook her head in the same manner.

“You didn’t ask?”

“Because it’s Yamamura-sensei that wanted to see me, right?”

What would she ask her homeroom teacher? Her homeroom teacher had asked that she go to the staff room and meet Yamamura-sensei, but she wouldn’t know why.

“But, you know. Normally a teacher would ask why another teacher wanted to see one of their students, right? ‘What business do you have with my Toudou?’ That sort of thing. She’d definitely ask. She’d know.”

Katsura-san’s voice was like that of a child coaxing a reluctant toy.

“You may be right... Ahh.”

“What?”

“You just reminded me. Our teacher asked, ‘Do you have any questions?’”

“Well there you go. The correct response would have been, ‘Why does Yamamura-sensei want to see me?’”

Katsura-san made a tut-tut noise, showing her exasperation with Shimako. But then Katsura-san smiled wanly, as though she thought better of it.

“Then again, the conversation wasn’t a complete loss.”

“Why so?”

“Well, you wouldn’t want a hint if it was something unpleasant. So when our teacher asked you, ‘Do you have any questions?’ it was probably because she wanted to tell you. Right?”

Indeed, that’s one way of looking at it.

“Katsura-san, you’re so smart.”

“...Why does it feel strange when you’re saying that to me, Shimako-san.”

Katsura-san had an inscrutable look on her face as she said this. Shimako thought it would be nice if she could understand her more easily.

“Why is it so strange? ... Ah.”

After Shimako asked this, Katsura-san slumped, as though a support that had been holding up her body had been removed. Shimako would

occasionally see people doing this, but she wasn't sure what it was they were trying to convey.

“What is it now?”

Ahh, right, she didn't have time to waste thinking about this at the moment.

“Cleaning. First we have to do the cleaning.”

Shimako clapped her hands together, then went back into the classroom. Then after the cleaning was finished, she was expected to go to the staff room.

Shimako had finished cleaning the classroom and made her way to the high school's staff room. It was Yamamura-sensei who first noticed her, and beckoned her over, saying ‘Come here, come here.’

“Just wait for a while. Until two more people get here.”

Yamamura-sensei looked as though she was taking a momentary break from tidying up some materials for class, or organizing some lost-and-found items. The teacher who sat beside Yamamura-sensei wasn't there currently, so Yamamura-sensei pulled out the chair and said, ‘Have a seat’ to Shimako.

“Two more people?”

Shimako asked as she politely gestured her refusal of the offered chair. She hadn't heard that anyone else had been invited.

“That's right. You're the first to arrive.”

“Ahh.”

At this point, Katsura-san would have definitely asked some questions. ‘What's your business with me?’ or ‘Who else have you asked to come here?’ But as she looked at the teacher who had resumed shuffling around,

Shimako felt as though she shouldn't interrupt her. Instead, she reflected on whether she had arrived too early.

At any rate, what could she want from me?

Yamamura-sensei.

She was one of Shimako's teachers, so it wasn't as though they had no interaction whatsoever. But Shimako couldn't remember having done anything noteworthy during class lately. And even if she had, and it had been a problem, then her teacher probably would have corrected her on the spot.

“...”

When she arrived, Yamamura-sensei hadn't said that she'd mistakenly called for her when she meant someone else. But the conversation would start when those two unknown people arrived, so all Shimako could do was wait.

Just knowing that two other people had been called here could make it easier to guess at why they were called.

If Yoshino-san were here, it would be obvious. Yamamura-sensei was the faculty advisor for the kendo club, and Yoshino-san was a member of that club.

(But I'm not involved with kendo at all.)

So there was no way she was being scouted for the club.

Shimako looked down and sighed then pulled herself together and looked up. For some strange reason, Yoshino-san's face was right in front of her.

“....!”

Shimako was too shocked to say anything. She had just been thinking about Yoshino-san, and then Yoshino-san appeared. Instantly. Like magic, or a vision.

“I knew it’d be you, Shimako-san.”

But Yoshino-san was real. After tapping Shimako gently on the shoulder, she turned towards the staff room entrance and called out, loudly:

“He-y, Yumi-san. Shimako-san’s here too.”

“Ah, umm.”

“Just wait. Yumi-san’s returning the cleaning log right now.”

“Ahh, why are you here?”

Shimako asked, unable to comprehend what was going on.

“Huh? We were called here.”

“I didn’t call you here.”

It was true she had been thinking of Yoshino-san, but she had never possessed the ability to summon someone to her side before now, nor had anyone even informed her that she had this power.

“I know. It was Yamamura-sensei who called us here.”

“Oh, I see.... Huh, Yamamura-sensei!?”

So, did that mean that the two people they were waiting for were Yoshino-san and Yumi-san? Shimako wanted to confirm this, but Yamamura-sensei was nowhere to be seen. She had been walking back and forth around here a while ago.

“Ahh, you’re right, Shimako-san’s here.”

Upon reflection, Shimako realized that she hadn’t been thinking about Yumi-san, so their appearance probably wasn’t her doing. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yumi-san, you’re also here to see Yamamura-sensei?”

“‘Also’? So that means you’re here to see her too?”

Yumi clasped her hands together in a show of surprise, then came over. Based on her reaction, it appeared that Yumi had no idea why they had been called here either. She even asked, ‘I wonder how many more people are coming?’

“Do you know why the three of us were called here?”

“Don’t you think it’s because we’re the next Roses?”

“...It could be.”

That would probably be the first thing that came to mind when asked what they had in common. The student council election that was held at the end of January had confirmed that they were the next three to be Roses. That thought must have been going through all of their minds.

“Could it have something to do with the plans for the Valentines Day dates?”

To sternly warn them against causing any disturbances.

“In that case, Mami-san would have been called here too, right?”

Or, rather, Mami-san would have called them together. Since it was the newspaper club that had organized the Valentines Day treasure hunt and the prize of a date with one of the future Roses.

Then, what? They all looked at each other. What had they been brought here to be told?

At the very least, Shimako was convinced that it was unrelated to kendo due to Yumi-san’s appearance.

“Ahh, Shimazu-san and Fukuzawa-san have arrived too. Splendid. I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

Yamamura-sensei's voice was light and breezy, to blow away the shadow that her arrival had cast over their faces.

“Since you're all here, shall we go now?”

“Okay?”

Despite not knowing what was going on, the trio could only nod in agreement and follow after Yamamura-sensei.

“Umm, where are we going?”

Shimako asked.

“It's impossible to have a calm conversation in the staff room because everyone's always rattling around, so I thought we'd go someplace else.”

At this time of day there were a lot of people coming and going – it wasn't just students here to see a teacher, but also those who were returning the cleaning logs and club members who had come to get the key to their clubrooms.

Yamamura-sensei took a key from the pocket of the jersey that she wore over her sweater instead of a cardigan and wound the strap around her fingers.

“And this way, I thought we could have a full and frank discussion.”

The words ‘Educational Guidance Room’ were written on the strap.

Part 2.

“The farewell address.”

The vice-principal announced.

“The students' representative, second year wisteria class, Toudou Shimako.”

Seated some distance away, Yumi heard Shimako respond to her name being called with a 'Here.'

It's finally starting.

"Second year pine group, Shimazu Yoshino."

"Here."

Unlike the previous answer, this 'Here' came from a much closer location. At this point, some murmuring could be heard from the seats reserved for the PTA and guests. Two people giving the farewell address? That was undoubtedly what they were muttering about.

The vice principal paused for a moment, to allow the speculative murmuring some time to die down, before continuing.

"Second year pine group, Fukuzawa Yumi."

When the third name was called out, a hush fell over the audience. During this silence, Yumi's response of, 'Here,' rang out.

Yumi hadn't meant to call out so loudly, but her throat had been agitated by a recent bout of coughing. Judging by the chuckles that were coming from the general vicinity of the earlier murmuring, Yumi's appearance was quite amusing. Or perhaps their cheeks were just relaxing after the shock of first two and then three names being called to deliver the farewell address, when they only expected one.

Either way, it didn't matter. Yumi put it from her mind.

The truth was, the gymnasium was never going to be devoid of sound – be it muttering, or chuckling, or something like her earlier coughing. Or take the sound of the human heartbeat. You wouldn't be able to live if you were bothered by each and every one.

Yumi walked to the aisle, slipping through the gap between the chair in front and the knees of her classmates. Shimako-san and Yoshino-san, whose names had been called before hers, were waiting there for her.

The gymnasium's stage was in front of Yumi.

To take that stage and deliver the farewell address to the graduating seniors was the duty that had been given to her.

It's okay. Don't cry.

At this very moment, Yumi was a representative of all the students enrolled at this school.

So the only time it would be acceptable for her to cry was when all the first and second year students were also crying.

Not just a third, but all of them.

Having told herself this, Yumi took the stage.

Onee-sama.

This farewell address is for all the third years.

But there's also a message in there that won't be apparent to anyone other than you.

Please understand this.

* * *

“Frankly, it's about the *farewell address*.”⁴

The words for ‘farewell address’ and ‘cleaning’ are pronounced the same in Japanese. I couldn't come up with an English equivalent, so have just used whichever the speaker intends, but with the word italicized.

Yamamura-sensei said, after they had entered the Educational Guidance room.

“*Cleaning...*”

Since it was that time of the day, Yumi had initially thought that Yamamura-sensei had said, ‘It’s about the cleaning.’ Shimako-san and Yoshino-san seemed to hear it the same way too.

“Well, we don’t have to talk about this while we’re standing, have a seat.”

“Okay.”

Despite her answer, Yumi was a student who hadn’t needed any Guidance with her Education, so wasn’t too familiar with this particular room. She honestly couldn’t determine which seat it would be appropriate for her to sit in. In the center was a sofa, like something from a lounge suite, but was that the position of power, or not?

“Anywhere’s fine. Look, I’ll sit here, so you three can sit over that side.”

Yoshino-san, Shimako-san and Yumi all followed Yamamura-sensei’s brisk instructions and sat down. Yumi wondered if Shimako’s place in the center was due to her being the sole current Rose, or a manifestation of the lack of confidence from the two members of pine class. One way or the other, it felt like they were relying on Shimako-san.

“Don’t be so stiff. I don’t have any quibbles with your behavior at school.”

Their teacher smiled, but the three students couldn’t see where this conversation was going and so weren’t able to smile back.

The Educational Guidance room seemed quite spacious when it was just the four of them holding a secret meeting. But Yumi knew. When you cram fourteen or fifteen people in here, it gets quite tight indeed.

This was the room that Torii Eriko-sama had been summoned to regarding the ‘Yellow Rose Turmoil’ incident, the room where all her concerned relatives had congregated.

“Earlier, you said this was about the *cleaning*.”

Shimako-san cut to the chase.

“Which *cleaning* are you talking about?”

“Which one? Well, for the graduation ceremony, of course.”

“So, the gymnasium then.”

“Naturally.”

At this point, none of the four people in the room had yet realized that they were speaking about different things.

“What are you asking us to do?”

Shimako-san asked matter-of-factly, still under the impression that they were talking about cleaning the gymnasium. Every year, the first years were responsible for cleaning the gymnasium and setting out the chairs prior to the graduation ceremony. If that tradition continued, why were they called here to discuss this?

“Basically, I’d like the three of you to perform the *farewell address*.”

“The three of us?”

The previously silent Yoshino-san shot back, half jokingly.

“I know it’s a break with tradition, but won’t you take this on?”

No kidding it’s a break with tradition. Unexpectedly, all three of them simultaneously shouted out:

“It’s impossible for three people.”

At this point, their teacher seemed pained as she looked from face to face.

“So, you’d all prefer to do it individually?”

“...What?”

“Huh?”

Finally, they all realized. That there was something not quite right about their conversation.

“Farewell address and cleaning, huh.”

There was a thawing as they took this in. A farewell address, then. That makes sense.

(Wait, farewell address?)

“So, you’re asking the three of us to deliver the farewell address?”

It wasn’t until now that the impact registered, as though the first time around had been a feint.

“Ehh!?”

It was a huge shock.

Yumi was more surprised than when she had heard that the three of them would have to clean the gymnasium by themselves.

“I’m sure you’ll choose an appropriate tone and style for your speech.”

Yamamura-sensei said.

“You’re all smart, so I think you can infer what the core of your speech should be, underneath all the decorative and sugary phrases.”

“In other words, there has to be some substance to it.”

Yoshino-san looked at their teacher with searching eyes.

“That’s correct.”

So this was a frank discussion, huh. It was kind of incredible. The three of them looked at each other, as if to ask, 'Are you okay with this?'

"Usually it's only one person who reads the farewell address. As you know, last year's farewell address was started by one person but finished by two. Well, we'll call that an accident, since the second person joining in was probably unplanned."

Obviously, it wasn't significant enough that the teachers had bothered to confirm whether this was the truth or not. The two people who had delivered the farewell address last year were the onee-samas of the currently present Yoshino-san and Yumi.

"So, this year's graduation ceremony. We knew we couldn't ask for volunteers or hold a lottery to determine who should be the student's representative."

"Hmm."

Yumi vaguely felt that it should go to someone with outstanding grades.

"For the new student's representative at the school entrance ceremony, it's primarily based on grades. But that's because they haven't yet entered the school, so we don't have a lot of other data to use. By the time the graduation ceremony comes around, we've more or less gathered enough information to make a decision. And what do you think we pay attention to when choosing someone to be the student's representative? Naturally, we look to someone who the students can all support to represent them."

It seems like quite a difficult decision. So they don't just choose the first name on the list of students ordered by their grades.

"It would be problematic if we chose someone who excelled academically, but had a poor attitude towards school. Similarly, choosing someone who was popular but had poor grades would be inviting rebellion. So in recent years we've often chosen someone from the student council executive. Since they're elected, they've already won the trust of the student body and, as they have to lead the student council, there's generally no problems with

their attitude. Their grades usually aren't too bad either, perhaps being named as the petit soeur of a Rose provides some incentive."

As she listened to this, Yumi slowly shrank inwards. She wasn't proud of it, but her grades had remained stubbornly average, making her supremely unqualified to deliver the farewell address. While she had been chosen as one of the next Roses in the election, she considered this more an endorsement of her friendly, down-to-earth nature.

"Then, there's no doubt about Shimako-san."

Yoshino-san said.

"That's right."

Yumi clapped her hands together. Shimako-san's grades were excellent, her attitude towards school was exemplary, she had the trust of the entire student body and was widely adored.

"Please, hold on. Yamamura-sensei just said that the three of us were to do it."

Shimako-san hastily interjected. Probably fearful that they would transfer the job to her if she were to remain silent.

"Toudou-san. I don't disagree with a word they've said."

Yamamura-sensei sank back into the sofa and folded her arms.

"But would you let me continue."

"Okay."

Yumi didn't need Yoshino-san to point out that if the conversation were to end here with unanimous agreement for Shimako-san then there was no point in bringing them all here and suggesting the three of them should give the speech together.

“That thing last year. Earlier I said it was an accident, but it was very well received.”

“That thing?”

She said, ‘that thing’. She called Rei-sama leaping out from the student’s seating area to help Sachiko-sama, who had broken down in tears as she was reading the farewell address, a ‘thing.’

“The farewell speech is really all about the outpouring of emotion that students have towards their graduating onee-samas.”

“Huh?”

“And Toudou-san’s onee-sama graduated last year.”

This time it was Yumi and Yoshino-san’s turn to say, ‘Wait, hold on.’

“Not having an onee-sama seems like a minor detail compared to the other conditions you mentioned.”

Yumi said. Then Yoshino-san continued:

“Shimako-san doesn’t currently have an onee-sama, but she’s like a petit soeur to all the third years.”

“Right, right.”

To be honest, the two of them didn’t want to do it. Or, more accurately, they didn’t think they could do it and were tag-teaming Shimako-san, who seemed much more capable.

“I’ve got it. Yumi-san and I will find an onee-sama for Shimako-san before the graduation ceremony.”

“Yeah, leave it to us.... Wait, what?”

Even without Yumi’s response it was plain to see that this talk about finding an onee-sama was just Yoshino-san’s joke. Well, maybe she was only half

joking. Shimako-san smiled wryly.

“So you would prefer a student with an onee-sama in the graduating class. Does that mean you’ve chosen who will give the formal reply?”

Shimako-san continued to smile as she asked this question, while Yoshino-san and Yumi’s eyes widened in shock.

How quickly the situation had changed. In last year’s graduation ceremony, Sachiko-sama had delivered the farewell address and Mizuno Youko-sama had delivered the formal reply. It goes without saying that those two were soeurs. And they were talking about how last year’s farewell address had been received –

“Do you want me to tell you?”

“No thanks!!”

Yumi and Yoshino-san vehemently declined. They both knew they would be in quite the predicament if their soeurs were named.

Yamamura-sensei chuckled at how frantic they were.

“There’s no reason not to, right?”

“Huh?”

“Or should I say, even if I told you, it still hasn’t been settled. Of course, there are some obvious contenders.”

Yamamura-sensei grinned as she watched the second year peach class duo. There was no doubt that Ogasawara Sachiko-sama and Hasekura Rei-sama were two of those contenders.

“Well, there’s no reason that the farewell address and the formal reply have to be given by soeurs. Although it certainly makes it more interesting when they are.”

Yumi wanted to jump in with, ‘Just whose side are you on?’ But as a teacher, she wasn’t on any of their sides.

“And so, there was a run-off ballot amongst the high school faculty.”

“...A run-off ballot.”

This must be what she meant when she had said they were to have a frank discussion.

“Who should it be out of Toudou Shimako, Shimazu Yoshino and Fukuzawa Yumi.”

“And?”

The sound of gulping was clearly audible. Yumi couldn’t predict whether she would be named, or someone else would be, so she concentrated on what was about to be said next.

“It was inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive?”

“I don’t remember the exact vote count, but there was no clear winner. There was something like one or two votes separating all of you, so it was hard to make a decision.”

“So the three of us...”

“Exactly. It’s up to you.”

Yamamura-sensei had put the ball squarely in their court. So, what next? Yumi looked into Yoshino-san and Shimako-san’s eyes. They couldn’t huddle together because they were sitting along the sofa, but Yumi felt they should have a strategy meeting to reach a consensus.

However.

“We’ll do it.”

A single person answered.

“Yoshino-san!?”

“We’re all in this together. Right? Shimako-san, Yumi-san?”

She was just saying whatever she wanted. Surely if the three of them were all in this together, then they would agree to it first and then announce it, right? Naturally, Shimako-san’s eyes were wide open too.

“Anyone that doesn’t want to do this together can do it themselves.”

“That’s absurd.”

What could possibly be her reasoning behind that?

“So then, is there anyone that doesn’t want to do this?”

Well, in Yumi’s case it wasn’t so much ‘doesn’t want to,’ as ‘won’t be able to.’

“In that case, there’s no alternative but for us to accept this responsibility. Right?”

Wait. Let’s slow down and think about this some more. There’s no way that the three of them would be given the honor of delivering the farewell address – . Yoshino-san was either reading her mind, or her facial expressions, when she smirked and said:

“What purpose do you think Yamamura-sensei had in mind when she booked the Education Guidance room and brought us here to have a frank discussion?”

“Huh?”

Why? Yumi shook her head. The reason for their secret talk. Hmm –

“Ah.”

No way.

“Gee, you girls are smart. It went just like I thought it would.”

There was no point tiptoeing around now that it was out in the open. This seemed like the sort of thing an organization of super villains on TV would do.

“I understand.”

Shimako-san opened her eyes and spoke. Which means they must have been closed until now. She had probably closed her eyes in order to concentrate while Yoshino-san and Yumi had been noisily arguing back and forth.

“I shall agree to do this.”

“Shimako-san!?”

“After much consideration I have decided that I should accept.”

Shimako-san continued.

“But this is my opinion. So it’s okay if you don’t agree, Yumi-san. I won’t force you.”

Shimako-san asked for confirmation that this was acceptable. Yamamura-sensei nodded and said, ‘Of course.’ So, between the two of them, they should be able to get someone to give the farewell address.

“And if I don’t accept?”

Yoshino-san shot Shimako-san a light glare at this. However.

“I believe Yoshino-san has already stipulated what she intends to do in that case.”

The boom was lowered and she was shut out.

“Well...I guess that’s true.”

Yoshino-san had been the first one to say, ‘I’ll do it,’ so she would probably regret it if Yumi were to end up delivering the farewell address by herself.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Yumi agreed.

She felt that the decisive blow had been Shimako-san’s decision. Yumi thought that if, after much thought, Shimako-san had reached the conclusion that it was better to do this, then it probably was. Really, Yumi thought it would have been better if she were to think things through for herself, but that would likely take too long. So she had decided to put her faith in Shimako-san’s decision.

And so, the farewell address in this year’s graduation ceremony would be jointly delivered by the three future Roses.

Yamamura-sensei seemed eminently satisfied with how the conversation had gone.

However, as they were on the way out of the Educational Guidance Room, Yamamura-sensei said, ‘Oh, right,’ and gave them one final guideline:

“The three of you will form up prior to the start of the address and take the stage together.”

That thing last year may have been well received, but they wouldn’t be allowed to join in one-by-one as the speech progressed.

Part 3.

“The farewell address.”

The vice-principal announced.

“The students’ representative, second year wisteria class, Toudou Shimako.”

Seated some distance away, Yoshino heard Shimako-san respond to her name being called with a ‘Here.’ Yoshino’s heart beat a bit faster. But that only lasted for about five or ten seconds.

Since Shimako-san’s name had been called, her own name would be next. Now that it was about to start, she didn’t have time to be nervous. Like a nose-diving roller-coaster, by the time you were aware of it, you were already starting to level out. That’s usually how things turned out.

“Second year pine group, Shimazu Yoshino.”

“Here.”

At the second name, there was some murmuring coming from the visitors and PTA seating area.

Oh geeze. There’s no need to comment on it, all they’re saying is multiple people are giving the farewell address – Yoshino thought as she stood up from her chair and walked forwards. Of course, she was conveniently ignoring the considerable surprise she had felt when she first learnt of this.

Then in that case, they’re sure to flip out when the third name is read aloud. As Yoshino silently greeted the waiting Shimako-san, the aforementioned third name was read out.

“Third year pine group, Fukuzawa Yumi.”

The ‘Here’ that came from the bottom of Yumi-san’s diaphragm roared through the gymnasium that had momentarily fallen silent, as though taking a breath.

Yoshino briefly thought that was pretty cool of Yumi-san. That was until she followed it up with a violent coughing fit, which chased that idea away.

Well, that’s her done for.

But Yumi-san wasn't even slightly discouraged, and was smiling when she arrived at the spot where Shimako-san and Yoshino were waiting.

Now that all three were assembled, Shimako-san led them forwards.

The gymnasium's stage was right in front of them.

The task that had been given to Yoshino was to take that stage and deliver a speech that would send off the graduating seniors.

Well, I'll be back in a bit.

By all rights, Yoshino should have been incredibly nervous, but she wasn't. Because Shimako-san and Yumi-san were by her side.

(More importantly)

Yoshino was more concerned with what was going to happen afterward.

What awaited Yoshino after the large stage of the graduation ceremony may have been small, but it was an important event, and it was all up to her as to whether it succeeded or failed.

Yoshino climbed up a few stairs as she watched Shimako-san's footsteps.

The wooden table that seemed to conceal the audience was awaiting the arrival of the students' representatives. It was a bit tight, but somehow they all squeezed behind it.

When Yoshino lifted her head, the auditorium that she looked down upon seemed like a vast ocean.

It was completely different to the rehearsals. Sure, the red and white curtains, the PTA and the visitors had all been added in, but more than that it seemed like the whole atmosphere had changed.

(Ahh, that's it)

The white corsages that bloomed from the chest of the graduating seniors looked like a wave of flowers.

Yumi-san spread open the scroll the speech was written on and adjusted the angle of the microphone.

“Onee-samas who are about to leave the nest of Lillian’s Girls Academy ...”

With the brisk voice of their lead batter, this unusual three-person farewell address had begun.

* * *

“Exactly. It’s up to you.”

Yoshino was the first to answer Yamamura-sensei’s question with, ‘We’ll do it.’

Naturally, this could be because she was unable to contain herself given how much she wanted to do this – but that wasn’t the case at all. It was because Yoshino felt that if they were to keep going back and forth on this issue, things would get worse for her.

Yoshino had been caught completely off guard when the phrase ‘formal reply’ had leapt forth from Shimako-san’s mouth. The startling news-flash about the farewell address had caused her to completely forget about the formal reply.

Still, you had to hand it to Shimako-san. Even though she had initially been surprised, she was still able to coolly sum up the situation. The farewell address and the formal reply, the two of them formed a single set.

The intention of the teachers was to have the farewell address delivered by someone whose onee-sama was graduating. And why would they want that?

She had said that they weren't particularly concerned about having soeurs deliver the farewell address and formal reply, but the petit soeur of the person giving the formal reply would have to be the frontrunner.

Based on that, Yoshino appraised Rei-chan's chances of delivering the formal reply.

Sachiko-sama delivered the farewell address last year. And they were both Roses, so this year it would be Rei-chan's turn. Rei-chan's grades were excellent and she had the profound respect of her fellow students. There wasn't a single aspect in which she trailed Sachiko-sama. Even if you were really grasping at straws, about all you could say was that she lost out in terms of hair length.

And while Yoshino didn't really want to say it, Sachiko-sama had blown it last year. It had been Rei-chan that had covered for her. Certainly, the parents and relatives may have interpreted that thing last year as a performance, but surely the wise choice would be to avoid someone who might repeat the same faux pas. So it would probably be entrusted to Rei-chan this year. Since Sachiko-sama would be seen as something of a crybaby.

And if Rei-chan was delivering the formal reply, that meant Yoshino was more likely to be chosen to deliver the farewell address. To let things continue on like this would be dangerous. If they rejected the proposal that their teacher had spent so long trying to persuade them of, that the three of them deliver the farewell address, then it looked as though Yoshino would have to deliver it herself.

She had to compromise here, before it got to that point. So.

"We'll do it."

It came out without her thinking about it. Yumi-san and Shimako-san had been incredibly surprised. But you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs. Sorry, but there was no way Yoshino was doing this on her own.

It turned out that they had to write their own speech for the farewell address.

Naturally, they could consult their teachers for guidance. But primarily it was left up to those delivering the farewell address. After all, what would be the point in reading out a speech that someone else had written for the graduating seniors? None, really.

They had started by reviewing written copies of the speeches from years gone by, injecting their own personality, and repeatedly revising. By the time the final version was complete, there was barely a week left before the graduation ceremony.

But it wasn't as though they'd been working flat out on it all that time. At first they were very laid back about it, thinking 'We have plenty of time before we have to start.' That then turned into, 'We should start thinking about this soon,' which finally grew into an urgent, 'What should we do? It's almost upon us.'

During that time they'd been extremely busy with the Valentines Day dates, a trip to the amusement park, making return gifts for White Day and other such things. Yumi-san had even nabbed herself a petit soeur and gone to visit the shrine to Inari.

When they had finally finished writing the speech, the conversation turned to how they would present it. As usual, they had been in the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion at the time.

"We're not all going to read it together?"

Yumi-san naively asked. Yoshino was just about to interject and say how hard it would be for them to stay in sync for such a long speech when Shimako-san spoke up.

"I think it would be good if we could do that."

Huh.

“Because the three of us are taking on the role that’s usually performed by one person, I think it would be wonderful if we could all read it with one voice.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Shimako-san’s agreeing that we all read this together? Yoshino’s mouth was silently opening and closing as she thought this, but then Shimako-san continued.

“However, I think that will be quite difficult to do.”

“Difficult?”

“Yes. Well, rather than trying to explain ... why don’t we stand up and try it.”

Assuming that had been intended only for Yumi-san, Yoshino watched them stand shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the table when Shimako-san prompted her with, ‘You too, Yoshino-san.’

“Huhhh.”

“It’s okay, just for a little while.”

Shimako-san then organized them so that Yoshino was in the middle with Yumi-san and Shimako-san either side of her.

“I think the table that will be on-stage for the ceremony is about this wide.”

Shimako-san placed a pencil and a ruler on the table in front of them to show the approximate width.

“And then, on top of this table, we’ll unroll the scroll with the speech. Oh, there’s a microphone as well. Let’s say this pencil case is the microphone.”

Various other items were arranged to mimic things that would be on the stage.

“Okay, let’s read out the farewell address.”

Shimako-san counted them in with a, ‘One, two, three, go,’ and then they simultaneously read aloud the first section of the farewell address.

“Onee-samas who are about to leave the nest of Lillian’s Girls Academy, congratulations on your graduation. We are deeply honored to be delivering these congratulations as representatives of all the students in this academy.”

Shimako-san cut them off there, and asked Yumi-san:

“Well?”

“It’s hard to read. Or, rather, it’s hard to make out what’s written over on your side of the scroll.”

Currently, facing the manuscript, they were lined up from right-to-left as Shimako-san, Yoshino and then Yumi-san. With the scroll spread out in the center, the first line of vertical writing was quite some distance from the person on the left.

“Still, you were able to read it correctly.”

Yoshino said to Yumi-san. Yoshino couldn’t quite say why, but she thought it had sounded quite pleasant when they all read the speech together.

“Well, that’s because I’ve got the first part memorized.”

Indeed. Yoshino changed places with Yumi-san to see for herself, and it really was hard to make out the characters written on the right-hand side when you were standing on the left. It wasn’t solely due to the distance, but also partly due to shadows cast by the other two people and their shoulders partially blocking line-of-sight.

“Even if we were to write another copy using larger lettering, the viewing angle or the light in the auditorium may be worse.”

“That’s true. So it would be difficult for the three of us to read this together.”

Yumi-san clasped her hands together in agreement. Yoshino was impressed. Yumi-san agreed to that much more readily than she would have if she had simply been told, 'It's too hard.'

"So my onee-sama and Rei-sama were able to read their speech simultaneously because it was just the two of them?"

Shimako-san nodded at Yumi-san's comment.

"That's right. And there wouldn't be enough room on the desk for us all to have our own copy. Although if we all memorized the entire speech, so we didn't have to look at it, we would be alright with just one copy."

Memorize the entire speech?

"That's impossible!"

Yumi-san and Yoshino shouted out simultaneously. Memorizing the entire speech would be preposterous. Yumi-san immediately ruled out the idea of reading the speech as one.

"Well then, shall we decide on the order of speaking?"

Shimako-san smiled.

They tried reading alternating sentences, but couldn't get that to work and decided that they would each read a single section.

"Normally you'd just split it into thirds, but the text doesn't really lend itself neatly to that."

Yoshino watched spellbound as Shimako-san briskly made annotations to the script. Normally she seemed very passive, but now she was being quite proactive.

"There, that's it. First up is Yumi-san. Next is Yoshino-san. Then I'm last."

"Huh? You've already decided the order?"

“Yeah.”

Shimako-san looked tense, but her voice was steady.

“Can I ask why?”

Yumi-san looked into Shimako-san’s eyes with intense curiosity.

“Why? ... Ahh I wonder why. Somehow it just feels right to me.”

The regular, gentle, Shimako-san had returned and shook her head. It was as though she had just been possessed by something.

“So why don’t we just leave it like this.”

Even if the possessing spirit had departed, it wasn’t going to relinquish the speaking order.

“Well, I guess it’s okay.”

Yoshino strongly suspected that Shimako-san had a reason for suggesting that order, but couldn’t guess what it could be. Consequently, Yoshino thought that she shouldn’t oppose Shimako-san.

Because Shimako-san wasn’t the kind of person who was only looking out for herself.

Yoshino was willing to place her faith in Shimako-san’s instincts.

Part 4.

“And though we have now reached the end, it gives me great honor to be able to pray for your health and future success in this farewell address.”

Shimako-san read the final sentence of the speech.

“Students’ representative, Toudou Shimako.”

Followed by:

“Shimazu Yoshino.”

And finally:

“Fukuzawa Yumi.”

And so the farewell address ended, with each of them signing off.

The wording of the first and last sentences was identical to last year’s, as an homage to Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. – Not only that, but it would serve as a template that future years could borrow from.

At any rate, it had ended peacefully.

(Huh? Peacefully?)

Is ‘peacefully’ really the appropriate term to use here?

It was true that nothing had happened while Yumi was reading her part of the speech. And while her nervousness about actually being up on stage meant that her performance wasn’t as good as some of her many practices, Yumi still awarded herself a passing mark. It certainly wasn’t a perfect 100, but it was about a 90, and that was good enough.

Even the hand off to Yoshino-san had gone smoothly. Yoshino-san started off slowly, but she sounded just like an announcer from the broadcasting club, picking up speed as her excitement grew.

That was when the incident happened. Or if incident is too strong a word, accident might do.

Whatever you want to call it. A bug came flying from somewhere, and started circling around above the stage.

It was incredible to think that, out of the whole gymnasium, the bug would choose to fly towards the stage right when they were in the middle of the farewell address. Sure, it was almost time for the hibernating insects to

awaken, but it was still cold in Tokyo. If only the bug had been just a little bit later (even an hour or so), or a little bit more considerate.

Yoshino-san didn't notice the insect at first, and kept reading from the manuscript. Neither did Yumi or Shimako-san, who were both standing right next to her. However it seemed that some eagle-eyed people in the audience did notice the bug flying around them, even though it was only about 1cm long.

So while they were in the middle of the farewell address, those students who had seen the insect whispered to their neighbors, saying something like, 'Hey, do you see that?' The people who heard this whisper would then be on alert, and spot the bug the next time it flew around. Which would lead to another round of whispering.

It was because of these slight murmurings that the three of them realized that something strange was happening in the gymnasium. And so, every so often, they'd see one of the students pointing in their direction.

Yumi didn't think they were doing anything unusual. So while Yoshino-san continued to read from the script, she and Shimako-san were looking around.

And then Yumi barely stopped herself from squealing by clasping both hands over her mouth, which was a brilliant move, if she did say so herself. Although the microphone was currently angled towards Yoshino-san, it was still in point-blank range and there was no doubt that it would have made an incredible racket if she had cried out.

That bug was a bee. It may have been a horsefly, or just a regular fly, but in Yumi's eyes it was a bee.

Although Yumi didn't shout out, Yoshino-san still noticed her overreaction and immediately stopped reading the speech.

And right then.

The bug glided in to land right on top of the script, as though it had been aiming for it.

Just as Yumi had suspected, it was a honey-bee.

Yumi and Shimako-san had spotted it earlier, so they'd had some time to prepare themselves. For Yoshino-san, however, it was completely unexpected.

Humans, when they're startled, seem to have a standard procedure they all go through.

First, something had fallen on the manuscript. Yoshino-san's eyes and ears swiveled around, she breathed in, her shoulders raised and lowered slightly. At this point, she still hadn't determined what the object was.

Finally, her brain put the pieces together and concluded that it was a bee. Then the report that 'bee = bee sting' was retrieved from her memory, which resulted in:

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaah –!”

People instinctively covered their ears with their hands. The damage must have been worse for the people sitting near the speakers, as the microphone was pointed straight at Yoshino-san's mouth.

As for the bee itself, it took off when Yoshino-san flung the script in the air, and resumed flying around in circles. Panic had now set in for Yoshino-san, and she hid, clinging to Yumi's back.

There was a brief uproar, but the gymnasium soon fell silent. Everyone had suddenly become aware that they were still in the middle of the farewell address.

So, how best to deal with this?

Shimako-san was the only person who moved in the deathly silent gymnasium. Yumi watched her, wondering what she was doing, as Shimako-san slowly picked up the script from where it had landed after

Yoshino-san flung it into the air. She then returned it to its former position, adjusted the microphone and started speaking.

“As for us first and second year students,”

Incredible, Shimako-san. She had continued reading the farewell address from right where Yoshino-san had left off. As though the accident with the bee had never happened.

Exactly. That’s the proper way to act.

Yumi gently peeled the insect off her back and made her stand in front of the table, then returned to normal. The bee continued to buzz around, but as long as it didn’t attack they should be alright. It wasn’t large enough to be a hornet or a wasp, so after all was said and done it was only a honey bee.

Eventually, Yoshino-san regained her composure. But her part in this campaign was already over.

It turned out to be a good thing that Shimako-san was delivering the final part of the speech. But it’s not like Shimako-san had ESP, so there was no way she could have foreseen such a situation when she was deciding the order of speaking. However, Yumi thought that if the order had been changed, there was no way that herself or Yoshino-san would have been able to deal with the situation.

But maybe Shimako-san has some sixth sense that she’s unaware of – Yumi took another look at the face of the person standing beside her.

“And though we have now reached the end, it gives me great honor to pray for your health and future success in this farewell address.”

Shimako-san read the final sentence of the farewell address.

A huge round of applause echoed around them.

It was in no way inferior to the previous year’s, but it was of a completely different nature.

The round of applause last year was akin to that given after watching a deeply moving film, full of love and sadness, while this year's was akin to that given after seeing the latest slapstick comedy.

– Plus, there was probably an element of 'Nice save Shimako-san' or 'Good job' in there too, don't you think?

Soloist's Ad lib

Part 1.

“The formal reply.”

The vice-principal announced.

“The graduating students’ representative, third year pine class, Ogasawara Sachiko.”

When her name was called, Sachiko responded with, ‘Here,’ and stood up from her chair.

The sound of people inhaling could be heard from the PTA and guest seating areas. So, how many people will be giving the formal reply? That’s probably what the intake of breath meant.

Since the farewell address had been given by three people, they probably assumed that the formal reply would also be given by three people. But after Sachiko’s name had been called and it became apparent that no other name would be, there was an audible sound of exhaling.

Sorry to disappoint you, but there’s only one person giving the formal reply.

The graduating student’s representative reads the formal reply. That was why she was now making her way towards the stage. That alone was enough for Sachiko.

The farewell address had been very good. The accident in the middle had been a bit of a surprise, but it gave everyone an opportunity to see the true face of the student council. It was a miracle hit brought about by an unexpected set of circumstances, although it was a tad unfortunate for Yoshino-chan.

There was a world of difference when compared to last year’s farewell address. Naturally, last year had cast a shadow over this year. Breaking

down in tears and completely relying on your friends was out of the question.

Sachiko took to the stage.

The Sachiko that read the farewell address last year, and the Sachiko that was to read the formal reply this year. Although Sachiko was still the same entity, she felt as though they were two completely different people.

For now, Sachiko swept her gaze from left to right across the student's seating area. Rei would be with the graduating students, Noriko-chan and Touko-chan with the first years, and Shimako and Yoshino-chan, as well as Yumi, amongst the second years.

Yumi.

Sachiko didn't allow her gaze to linger on her petit soeur, instead adjusting the angle of the microphone.

Sachiko had most definitely received the message that had been sent to her.

Yumi didn't say it in words, but her posture clearly communicated that she was watching out for Sachiko.

So it'll be alright. She wasn't about to crumble.

(Well then.)

Sachiko unfolded the paper that had been used in place of an envelope and quietly removed the object encased within. The single sheet of paper that was her script had been folded into many layers.

(Oh.)

The insect that had disappeared when the three girls had stepped down from the stage after finishing the farewell address had reappeared to read the formal reply.

Lifting her head slightly, Sachiko watched the flying figure.

(It was a bee after all.)

She had expected as much based on Yoshino-chan's shriek. And she was right. But it really wasn't very big. Just a honey bee.

It was said that honey bees can only use their stingers once, and then they die. So it was unlikely to attack her unless she threatened it. But, still. Even though it was only flying around the general area, it was still annoying.

(What to do about that?)

The bee circled around, about one and a half meters above Sachiko's head.

(The only thing I can do is to deliver the formal reply as is.)

There had been no guidance about how to deal with such a situation if it were to arise. It was probably something that the teachers had never even considered. They could halt the graduation ceremony until the bee was chased out of the gymnasium, but there was no telling how long that would take.

(For one thing, how would you even chase the bee out?)

As she calmly pondered these things, Sachiko finished unfolding her script.

Just then.

The bee glided down in front of Sachiko's eyes, and landed on the script for the formal reply, as though it had been aiming straight for it.

“...”

Sachiko's hand moved of its own accord before she had a chance to think about it. Her actions drew everyone's attention.

The script had a crease about a third of the way down from where it had been folded. The bee had come to a halt in a space between two words, as though it was just another letter. Like watching a video being rewound, Sachiko smoothly refolded the paper until it was in its original shape.

That was all.

Alas, the bee was imprisoned within the paper.

“Even the bees have come to celebrate our graduation. However, it was getting a bit carried away, so I thought we should give it some time to rest.”

Sachiko adjusted the microphone while she was speaking then, just to be sure, put the speech back in its paper envelope.

“I’ll set it free outside afterward.”

After placing the envelope back on the table, Sachiko looked ahead once more.

“To everyone who is celebrating our commencement of a new journey...”

The formal reply had begun.

* * *

“I want to give the formal reply.”

That was how Sachiko began the conversation.

A day in January.

From memory, it was just before the student council elections.

“Oh?”

Yamamura-sensei leaned her face forward and acted as though Sachiko had said something ambiguous. She didn’t come out and say, ‘Pardon?’ but it was written all over her face.

“Like I said, I want to give the formal reply. When I asked the vice-principal, I was told to speak to you, Yamamura-sensei.”

Sachiko omitted the irrelevant detail that she had been directed from her homeroom teacher to the seniors’ head teacher and then to the vice-principal.

“Let me just make sure I’m hearing you correctly.”

Yamamura-sensei lowered her voice.

“You’re talking about the formal reply during the graduation ceremony.”

“Yes.”

There were other things she could have meant. ⁵ *Hot spring bath* or *housekeeper*. Since they were measures of time, you wouldn’t normally say ‘I want to give *some time ago*,’ or ‘I want to give *the winter solstice*,’ and as Yamamura-sensei wasn’t about to pass away it would be rude to say ‘I want to give your *funeral address*.’

Again, words that sound the same as ‘formal reply’ have been italicized.

“I see. I didn’t think the Ogasawara-san who had been accepted into Lillian’s Girls University would be interested in learning how to brew Japanese rice wine from scratch.”

“Are you a rice wine *brewer*?”

“I’ve just started recently. Although that’s irrelevant to our discussion.”

Yamamura-sensei looked grumpy as she continued.

“Why volunteer? Every year, the formal reply ... and the farewell address, come to think of it, are jobs that no-one ever volunteers for – so much so that I mistook you for someone wanting to learn about brewing rice wine.

So, traditionally, the teachers have to decide who they want to give the address and then ask them sweetly, ‘Won’t you please do this?’”

That was true, last year she had been summonsed to the educational guidance room and asked if she would like to give the farewell address. Although not by Yamamura-sensei.

“... So does that mean you’ve already decided who will give the speech this year too?”

“Usually we may have, but unfortunately we haven’t narrowed it down just yet. The third year homeroom teachers have their heads full with career advice at the moment.”

“Is that so? No, I thought that might be the case. This was only a declaration of intent, but I thought it better to put it out there.”

If they had already decided, then it would have been too late. That was why Sachiko had come here during the middle of January, when it was still too early to be talking about the graduation ceremony.

“Then I acknowledge that you have expressed your desire to deliver the formal reply. But it’s not something that I can decide right now. So for today, you should go home. I’ll have to consult with the other teachers.”

So for today – . Sachiko nodded. She hadn’t expected it to be decided on the spot.

Since they usually don’t get any volunteers, then surely they would give it to the person who volunteered this year. Thinking about this, Sachiko pictured scissors-paper-rock being used to decide which of the candidates would be selected, but then corrected herself. The farewell address and formal reply were solemn tasks given to representatives of the student body.

“Thank-you for your time.”

Sachiko bowed her head and was making her way towards the door when Yamamura-sensei called to her.

“Why do you want to do it?”

“I won’t stay beaten.”

“Beaten... Are you talking about last year’s farewell address?”

“Is there anything else?”

There were plenty of people who had praised and congratulated her on last year’s farewell address, but to Sachiko it was nothing more than a disgrace.

The only one who deserved praise was Rei.

There was no way she could redo last year’s farewell address, but she didn’t want that unsightly impression to remain as she left this place.

The formal reply was her last chance to avenge that defeat.

Part 2.

Sachiko didn’t hear anything more about this for some time.

It wasn’t until the middle of February that Yamamura-sensei called for her. She had been kept waiting for a month.

During that time, the next school council had been chosen and the Valentine’s Day events had taken place.

Yamamura-sensei escorted her to the Educational Guidance Room then sank down into the sofa facing Sachiko and said:

“The idea has been put forth that two people should deliver the speech.”

“Two people?”

“I won’t say who, but there is another candidate.”

At first Sachiko was relieved, since Yamamura-sensei had mentioned another candidate – which must mean she was one of the two. However.

“Having two people give the speech doesn’t feel right to me.”

Sachiko was still smarting over having to rely on Rei to complete the farewell address, which she had intended to deliver solo. She wouldn’t be able to avenge that memory if someone else accompanied her from the start.

“I thought you’d say that.”

Sachiko smiled. Yamamura-sensei was the only one with whom she had been completely upfront about her intentions.

So the other teachers held a different opinion, did they?

“But the mistakes I made last year rest solely on my shoulders, don’t they?”

“No-one’s saying that. Although you may disagree, the teaching staff thought this would be better given last year’s farewell address. That’s all.”

“You just don’t want to be embarrassed by me failing in the same way again.”

Sachiko flared up, raising her voice. This was her one weak point – she would get emotional when people picked at her failings.

Yamamura-sensei silently regarded Sachiko.

“...I’m sorry.”

The conversation continued after Sachiko’s apology.

“And what does this other candidate think about being asked to give the formal reply with me?”

If Yamamura-sensei were to leave now, the door would close on Sachiko’s opportunity to give the formal reply. Probably.

“I haven’t told her about this yet. Only that she’s a candidate. I thought I should speak to you first. That was my decision.”

“I’m honored.”

Sachiko was extremely grateful for that decision. If that other person were asked if she wanted to do the speech with Sachiko, things would have become hopelessly complicated.

“Teacher.”

Sachiko’s expression turned serious.

“I don’t know who this other person is, but I will stand against them. I quite like the idea of using my own ability to win the right to give the formal reply.”

“You’re determined to do this on your own, I see.”

“Yes.”

Sachiko nodded her head. Yamamura-sensei surreptitiously sighed as she smiled. She looked as though she had expected it would go like this.

“Very well. I’ll take your feelings into account, and we’ll discuss this further another day.”

“Thank-you for your consideration.”

That day came a week after this conversation.

“Ogasawara-san, do you have a minute?”

It was lunch-time, and Sachiko had been walking down the corridor in the opposite direction to Yamamura-sensei when the voice called her to stop.

“Yes?”

She soon realized that this was about the formal reply. Sachiko thought that she would be escorted to the Educational Guidance Room once more, but instead Yamamura-sensei only guided her to an alcove away from the people rushing past, and they stopped to talk there.

“Do you remember that I told you there was another candidate?”

“Yeah.”

Although Sachiko hadn't been told the identity of the other person, at that time.

“My conversation with you turned everything on its head, so I spoke to her about the formal reply.”

“Okay.”

“And she refused.”

“Refused?”

That was unexpected. Sachiko believed that while there may be very few people willing to volunteer like she had, if someone was asked to deliver the formal reply they would readily accept. After all, it was an honor to be named as a representative of the students.

“That's right. She said she didn't want to do it. She wanted no part of it. Indeed, she thought it was better to completely refuse.”

Yamamura-sensei smiled as she recalled the conversation.

“So that means you have no-one left to fight.”

“...”

Sachiko understood what the words meant, but she didn't get any satisfaction from them. It was as though they had robbed her of her fighting spirit.

“What’s the matter? I’ve just told you that you’ve been selected to give the formal reply.”

“Mmmm.”

It seemed a strange way to look at it, but Yamamura-sensei was correct.

“You’re not pleased?”

“I am pleased. But.”

“But you wanted to have to fight to get this?”

“Ahh.”

Sachiko winced at her keen observation.

“I’m not sure... No, you’re probably right.”

There had been a clean slate when Sachiko volunteered, and her wholehearted desire to give the formal reply had been enough to carry her through. She hadn’t stopped to think about whether or not she would be an appropriate choice to play that role.

When she heard that there were two candidates, she was pleased that she would have to defeat someone to be awarded the role. If she were to win in a fair fight, then it would prove that she was worthy of giving the speech. Everyone would agree, if it was put like that.

But what now, since her opponent had stood down without a fight? Sachiko was suddenly uneasy. Was she really the right choice for this?

“Shall I tell you something interesting?”

Yamamura-sensei prefixed what she said next with, ‘Although this is strictly between us.’

“This other candidate, I never told them that someone else was being considered.”

“Okay.”

“And despite this, she said, ‘Ogasawara-san should deliver the formal reply.’”

“Huh?”

“She said that you should deliver the speech alone. So you see, you’re not the only one who feels this way. There are other people that think you should deliver the formal reply too.... Well, does that make you more willing to do this?”

“Ah...”

Really, it was foolishness on her part to suddenly start wondering if she would be good enough.

It was best to put a stop to any worrying she might do over that.

As long as she wanted to deliver the formal reply, any thoughts about whether or not she would be suitable were pointless.

So she had to deliver a formal reply that everyone would appreciate. That was the only way Sachiko could respond to the kindness of the other candidate, who had recommended her.

“Well then. We can discuss the details later.”

Yamamura-sensei gave a small wave, then walked off down the hallway.

“Umm.”

Sachiko turned around and called out. Hearing her voice, Yamamura-sensei also turned around.

“Umm.”

Sachiko was glad that Yamamura-sensei had stopped, but the words wouldn’t come. There was something she had to say to Yamamura-sensei.

Not just one thing, but two or three. They were probably all words of gratitude.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Sachiko was still trying to work out where to start and what words of thanks to use. Yamamura-sensei smiled at Sachiko, and said:

“You know, it’d be a serious problem if you lost your nerve, as there would be no-one left to give the formal reply.”

Yamamura-sensei left her with those parting words and walked away. Sachiko merely bowed her head and said, ‘Thank-you.’

Yamamura-sensei was a Lillian’s Academy old-girl.

She had surely been a wonderful onee-sama while she was at school. Of course, she was wonderful still.

Part 3.

” – and to these words of thanks, let me add my personal gratitude for being given the opportunity to deliver this formal reply.”

Onee-sama smiled broadly.

“Graduating students’ representative, third year pine class, Ogasawara Sachiko.”

Finally, she looked straight at Yumi. That wasn’t Yumi reading too much into it, nor conceit. Despite the distance between them, their eyes still met.

A thunderous round of applause rolled through the gymnasium. Everyone was clapping so hard their hands must have been turning bright red. The applause just kept coming, not quieting down. On the contrary, people started rising from their chairs.

A standing ovation.

Has a formal reply ever received such a response in the history of Lillian's Girls Academy? Yumi didn't know for sure, but she thought this was probably a first.

Having used her script to capture the honey bee, Sachiko-sama hadn't read the formal reply. Instead, she had expressed it.

That didn't mean she had memorized the script beforehand and was just reciting it verbatim. She was expressing what she was feeling at that very moment. Even someone who didn't know the contents of the script would have been able to see that.

The style of the phrases she used hadn't overpowered the substance of the reply, but the words she had spontaneously chosen reached the hearts of the people listening.

From beginning to end, she had kept her head held high, looking out over her fellow graduates, the *petit soeurs* they would leave behind, the teachers that had guided them, the families that had raised them, and the guests that had come to honor them as she weaved her words together.

She was magnificent.

Even as Sachiko-sama stepped down from the stage, the applause didn't stop.

Atsumi-sensei rose from her seat in the teacher's area, walked over to Sachiko-sama and relieved her of the script for the formal reply, before leaving the gymnasium. She had probably gone to set the bee free. The way she walked made it look as though she was protecting something, but she made it out of there.

The applause continued even after Sachiko-sama had returned to her seat amongst the graduating students.

As Yumi applauded, tears tumbled from both her eyes.

Even though her goal had been for no major crying episodes, it was alright. Because these weren't tears of sorrow at their separation.

Ogasawara Sachiko-sama was truly amazing.

And these tears were due to the pride that Yumi felt, knowing that Sachiko-sama was her onee-sama.

Connecting Chains

Part 1.

I am a honey bee.

Actually, I'm a human, but I can transform myself into the shape of a bee with a little known spell. Pretty cool, right?

“Oh, you're a magician? I've been alive for nineteen years now, and this is the first time I've ever met one.”

In truth, I came to Lillian's today to join in the congratulation of my juniors Sachiko and Rei at their graduation ceremony. But my cruel friend said that I wasn't allowed to enter the gymnasium. So I turned myself into a tiny little bee and flew off to take a look at the graduation ceremony.

“And so, how were things going inside the gymnasium?”

Let's see. It was all very exciting. But, as I was so engrossed in what was happening, I blundered and was spotted by Atsumi-sensei, who chased me outside. Ahhh, such a shame that I couldn't stay for just a little bit longer, until it was all over.

“It's not a shame at all.”

Unable to take any more, Youko turned to her two dear friends.

“Can you please stop joking around? And you too, Eriko. As amusing as you may find it, can you stop indulging Sei?”

Knowing that a reaction would only spur them onwards, Youko had resolved to ignore the idiotic story that was unfolding behind her back but she had reached her limit. A bee? And magic? And an evil friend – just what kind of story was she telling?

“It doesn’t bother me.”

Sei laughed as she stretched her arms.

“My, someone’s grumpy today. Youko.”

Eriko peered into Youko’s face. What Eriko had said was true, Youko was acting grumpy today and she looked away, feeling awkward.

“I’m just distracted.”

In front of her eyes, a bee was flying about cheerfully.

The bee’s yellow and black body shone in the blue sky.

This bee was the one that had been chased out of the gymnasium.

Youko knew this because a short while ago, Atsumi-sensei had emerged from the gymnasium and slowly unfolded some white paper object. At that point, some insect-like creature had flown out of the paper – and that insect was this bee.

Really, it was quite impressive that Sei could come up with her story about using magic to turn into a bee in order to watch the graduation ceremony based solely on those ingredients. Although half of that could be shock.

For whatever reason, the three graduates were now quite close to the gymnasium.

Eriko, who had arrived late, had cheerfully announced there would be hardly anyone keeping an eye on the back of the gymnasium, so they had decided to come here. She even said she knew a round-about way that would get them there without being seen.

After hearing that, Sei’s temporarily dampened desire to sticky-beak had flared up again. All thanks to the fuel that Eriko had been pouring around.

“But, ya, know – it’s strange how the person who said we couldn’t go to the gymnasium is the one who’s straining the hardest to hear what’s being said

inside.”

Sei pointed her finger at Youko, who was sitting closest to the outer wall.

“That’s not it. I just wanted to know where they were up to in the ceremony. Oh, they’re up to the graduation song.⁶ We should get going soon.”

https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Aogeiba_t%C5%8Dtoshi

“Get going?”

“You promised me we would when we decided to come here. Or, should I say, when the two of you dragged me down here.”

Only a little bit. Despite saying this, Youko had had a wonderful time here. And since there were no doors in this wall, they hadn’t been spotted by either the student receptionists or Atsumi-sensei when she had temporarily left the gymnasium. But if they waited until the ceremony was over and students were exiting, then even this place would be risky.

Youko couldn’t hear exactly what was being said inside, but could sense the excitement rising, and that was enough.

“Come on, hurry up.”

She grabbed Sei and Eriko by their collars.

Well then, what was next?

That’s right, Yoshino-chan was going to show them something interesting.

Part 2.

The sun’s rays were warm.

Sachiko instinctively squinted the instant she stepped through the doorway.

“Yumi.”

In amongst the light was her petit soeur.

“Have you been waiting for me?”

Yumi came running up to her as she walked forwards.

“Yes... Here.”

Yumi was holding out the black ribbon that Sachiko had left in her keeping.

Their charm. An item that would bind them together even when they were apart.

Sachiko nodded, and picked up one end of the neatly folded ribbon. Pulling at it, the ribbon stood up in Yumi’s palm like a folding fan.

And then it stretched between the two of them, like a finishing line. There was no trace of where it had been tied that morning.

Just as it was about to leave her palm, Yumi pinned the free end down with her index finger. And like that, the two of them tugged playfully on the ribbon.

Once, twice, three times.

And then it was free of Yumi’s hands. The two of them smiled. No words were exchanged, but they had clearly conveyed what they wanted to say.

Sachiko folded the ribbon once more, this time in her palm, and put it into her pocket. Then she reached her now empty hand into purse.

“Here, this is from me.”

After saying this, Sachiko offered her tissue case to Yumi.

“Ahh.”

Yumi was a bit flustered. Probably thinking that Sachiko was taking offense at her red nose.

“You’ll feel better after you’ve blown your nose.”

“Umm, this isn’t...”

Yumi was probably going to say that it wasn’t from crying. Sachiko used her hand holding the tissue case to gently lower the hand Yumi had pointed at her own nose.

“It’s good for anything, right?”

From dry-eye to hay-fever. That was something that Yumi had said. Although Sachiko was unsure whether Yumi would remember it.

“Right. Gochisou-sama.”⁷

This is an expression of gratitude usually said after meals.

Yumi took the tissue that was poking out from the case. She had spoken quite naturally, but something sounded amiss.

“Gochi...?”

“Ahh, no, that’s wrong. Itadakimasu⁸, I guess.”

And this is usually said before meals.

Both of these phrases made it sound like Yumi was responding to an offering of food.

“You’re not a goat, you know.”

As Sachiko smiled at this, the sound of Yumi blowing her nose rang out.

Part 3.

The sun's rays were warm.

Rei instinctively squinted the instant she stepped through the doorway and into the flood of sunlight.

Grand weather for a grand occasion.

As for the graduation ceremony itself, the middle part had been a bit nerve-wracking but there was a finality to the way it had ended.

It had been a good ceremony. All of it. Yep.

Even the final homeroom for the third year chrysanthemum class hadn't been a gloomy affair, perhaps aided by the writings on the blackboard. It had ended without any tears whatsoever.

They were given their diplomas and their final report cards, which were put into purses or indoor shoes.

It was simply good manners to tidy up after yourself. Like the sky overhead, Rei's soul was clear.

The sound of someone blowing their nose.

Her free-flying spirit was pulled back to reality by the noise, and Rei turned around.

And there were Sachiko and Yumi-chan.

Yumi-chan clung to a recently used tissue, obviously the one used just before when Rei had heard that noise. But despite the ordinariness of the setting, the pair were looking at each other with expressions more at home on someone stopping to admire a flower garden. While other students rushed back and forth around them, they looked as though they had been transplanted there from some other location.

“Oh, Rei.”

Rei was just thinking about leaving quietly when she was spotted by Sachiko.

“Where are you off to? We’re supposed to be meeting at the statue of Maria-sama, right?”

“Ahh, yeah.”

“Yoshino-san said she’d be a bit late, so how about we head over there now.”

Yumi-chan ran up to Rei. Despite Yumi-chan’s best efforts to make it seem like she wasn’t interrupting, Rei knew she was being a third-wheel.

“Good work today, Yumi-chan. You too, Sachiko.”

Pulling herself together, the first thing to do was to congratulate them on the farewell address and formal reply.

“Thank-you. But it was turned into a bit of a slapstick comedy by the accident in the middle.”

From beside Yumi, Sachiko cut into their conversation.

“I was much more worried about Rei than your group, Yumi. When Yoshino-chan cried out, I thought Rei was going to leap out of her seat and jump up on stage.”

“Shouting ‘Yoshinoooo’?”

“Right, ‘Yoshinoooo’”

The Red Rose sisters giggled, right in front of the person in question.

“Was never gonna happen.”

Rei spat the words out. Of course, it was just an act. Truthfully, she had half risen to her feet when it happened.

“Before the graduation ceremony, Sachiko cast a spell on me. Even if I wanted to move, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

“Ohh? What kind of spell was it?”

Yumi-chan asked, fascinated. Sachiko replied before Rei had a chance to.

” ‘From the time the ceremony starts until the time it ends, you can’t leave your seat.’ ”

“But in that case, wouldn’t Rei-sama have been unable to accept her graduation certificate?”

“Right? That’s what I said too. So Sachiko amended her spell to say that it was okay for me to leave my seat to receive my certificate. And then I asked if she should also add that it’s okay for me to stand when we sing – and how do you think she responded? She said, ‘I shouldn’t have to add that, it’s just common sense.’ Hardly fair, don’t you think?”

“...Sounds like it turned into quite the complicated spell.”

Yumi-chan let out a sigh of admiration.

“Guess so.”

But, because of that, Rei had made it though the ceremony without jumping out of her seat like last year.

During the farewell address. – And also, the formal reply.

“I think it’s better not to delve too deeply into the spell. Since the graduation ceremony is already over.”

Sachiko said, as she started walking.

“Yep.”

Since it's already over. All that was left was the commemorative photo with her friends.

“Ahh.”

Just before the fork in the path in front of the statue of Maria-sama, Rei broke into a run when she spotted one of the students ahead of her.

“Rei?”

“Give me a minute. I'll be right back.”

Rei answered Sachiko without turning around, and picked up her pace.

“Rosa Foetida?”

She flew past their meeting place, and Noriko-chan and Touko-chan who were already waiting there, and sprinted down the path lined with ginkgo trees.

“Chisato-chan!”

Rei shouted when her voice was within range.

“R-Rei-sama?”

Chisato-chan turned around, surprised at hearing her name called out.

“So...rry. I ... just ... remembered.”

“Huh?”

Having sprinted to catch up to Chisato-chan, Rei was out of breath. Since continuing the conversation wasn't feasible as is, she stopped to catch her breath.

“Chisato-chan. You had your hair done up with curlers.”

Rei had been thinking about it during the graduation ceremony, until it finally dawned on her. Chisato-chan was the girl who had won last year's Valentine's Day treasure hunt, and gone on a half-day date with her.

“...”

“Oh, am I wrong?”

She had been so sure of it. Then Chisato-chan shook her head.

“You're not wrong.”

Rei let out a sigh of relief. If she had been wrong, she would have been a complete idiot.

“So will you take back what you said this morning about me being an idiot?”

Rei was caught up in the moment as she said this. Chisato-chan responded by looking downwards.

“... You are.”

“Huh?”

“Rei-sama, like I thought, you are an idiot. You don't have to pay attention to every little thing someone like me says.”

“Huh?”

The tears fell from Chisato-chan's downcast eyes in large drops onto the tree lined path. What brought this on?

“I'm sorry.”

Rei had chased after her seeking to apologize, but all she'd done was make Chisato-chan cry.

Feeling like she really was an idiot, Rei apologized to Chisato-chan once more and then embraced her.

Part 4.

“Oh? Yumi-sama, weren’t you wearing black ribbons today?”

Noriko-chan asked her.

“Yep.”

When Yumi and Sachiko-sama arrived at the statue of Maria-sama, the two first-years and Shimako-san were already there, which meant they were only waiting for the Yellow Rose sisters.

Tsutako-san, their photographer, was scouting out locations for the shoot and taking photos of students who requested her services. Naturally, Shouko-chan was following her around.

“Very eagle-eyed of you.”

Yumi said to Noriko-chan.

She had been wearing the black ribbons only for the graduation ceremony. Since Yumi hadn’t seen Noriko-chan before or after the ceremony, she must have spotted them while Yumi was giving the farewell address. But it was a long way from the stage where Yumi had delivered the address to the seats where the first years sat.

“But my onee-sama was wearing those ribbons this morning.”

Touko said to Noriko-chan, referring to the red ribbons Yumi was currently wearing. Correct. However.

“Oh, I don’t remember seeing you this morning, Touko.”

Yumi shook her head. Yumi had no memory of meeting Touko, starting from the time she left her house this morning until just now when they had all gathered together. And speaking of ribbons, this was the first time she had ever seen the ones that Touko wore (red lace ribbons with a black stripe down the center that looked as though they were recently purchased).

“I only caught a glimpse of you as you were walking down the corridor.”

It seems Shimako-san’s petit soeur wasn’t the only eagle-eyed one, her own was as well. Yumi smiled without saying anything.

“So it seems as though Yumi-sama was wearing them only during the ceremony, perhaps as some kind of symbol.”

“Those black ribbons.... It’s the one we found yesterday in the room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion, right?”

That was also correct. It’s not just their eyes that were sharp, the petit soeurs of the boutons also had sharp minds.

“That’s right. It’s a charm. Rosa Chinensis lent it to me.”

When Yumi had finished, Noriko-chan started to speak and only got as far as, ‘But that was,’ before she seemed to recall something. After that, no more questions came. Touko merely said, ‘Is that so?’ and smiled. They think quickly too.

Being supported by these two reliable petit soeurs, next year’s Yamayurikai should be a breeze - although that’s something you’d expect the graduating seniors to say, not the people themselves.

Hey, onee-sama... As she was thinking this, Yumi turned to where Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san were standing a short distance away, when they both simultaneously called out.

“Onee-sama!”

(Huh? Onee-sama?)

The two of them were Yumi's and Noriko-chan's onee-samas. So Yumi thought she must have misheard them. But when she followed their gaze to where they were looking, their onee-samas were indeed standing there.

The former Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko-sama.

The former Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama.

And the former Rosa Foetida, Torii Eriko-sama, were all there.

The trio were all smiles as they walked over and stopped in front of Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san. So Yumi rushed over as well.

“Ooooooh.”

Yumi couldn't stop herself from getting excited at seeing their beautiful appearance. Just how long had it been since she had seen all three of them together like this? Not since the inter-school kendo tournament, which would make it about four months now.

“Gokigenyou. Is everybody well?”

Eriko-sama inquired.

Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san seemed delighted as they responded, ‘Yes, thanks for asking,’ and ‘Gokigenyou.’ But as for Yumi.

“Wh wh wh wh.”

Yumi's excitement at seeing these unexpected visitors had turned her into a broken record. Then Sei-sama feigned a serious expression and said:

“Allow me to explain. The translation of the Yumi-ese phrase ‘Wh wh wh wh’ is ‘What brings you all here?’”

Before Sei-sama had a chance to finish, someone else shouldered their way in front of her.

“Anyone could tell that.... Yumi-chan, you haven't changed a bit.”

“Youko-sama. Did you come here today to celebrate my onee-sama’s graduation?”

Yumi skipped around, overjoyed at seeing her beloved grand-soeur. She realized, all too late, that Touko was watching her from behind. The dignity of the onee-sama had come crashing down to earth – although she really didn’t have much of that to begin with.

“Yes, of course I’m here to congratulate Sachiko. Although the one that started it all was that shape-shifter over there.”

“Shape-shifter?”

“Currently she’s in human form, but it seems she’s actually a honey-bee.”

Youko-sama said, pointing at Sei-sama.

“Ummm.”

Even the usually level-headed Youko-sama could occasionally make random statements. Sei-sama was a honey-bee. What kind of a metaphor was that? At any rate, it looked like today was honey-bee day.

“Yoshino-chan said to come and have a look, so hey, we came to have a look.”

Said the honey-bee.

Yumi was a bit surprised to learn that Yoshino-san had called them here. Because she hadn’t heard a single word from Yoshino-san about this.

(Ahh, maybe that’s why.)

Why Yoshino-san had been looking like she was about to blow her fuse all morning. Still, what could she be planning, calling the former Roses here?

“Eriko was invited to come along by Yoshino-chan too, right?”

Youko-sama turned to where she expected Eriko-sama to be, but Eriko-sama wasn't there.

"If you're after Eriko-sama..."

As she spoke, Shimako-san looked off to one side. Following her gaze, they could see Eriko-sama talking to two members of the photography club.

"Sorry, sorry. I just went over to ask Takeshima Tsutako-san for some photographs."

Eriko-sama said after she had hurried back.

"Photographs?"

"Over the new year's break, I ran into her at a shrine and she took some photos then. I thought if I didn't ask her straight away and kept putting it off, I'd probably forget about it. Plus, I took the opportunity to say hello to Shouko-chan, the little sister."

"Shouko-chan isn't a little sister, though."

Yumi instantly corrected her. Shouko-chan was always by Tsutako-san's side, but she wasn't her petit soeur. You could probably add, 'yet,' to that last sentence, although there had been no movement from either of the people involved.

"Oh, but she is."

Eriko-sama smiled and turned to look at Shouko-chan.

"Katsumi-san's."

Ahh, so that's it. Eriko-sama knew that Shouko-chan was Naitou Katsumi-sama's little sister.

"So then where is Yoshino-chan? And Rei's gone missing too."

Sachiko-sama muttered, and then:

Two people simultaneously converged on them, from the right and left sides of the path.

– Rei-sama and Yoshino-san had arrived.

Part 5.

Her field of vision gradually expanded as she walked along the path next to the library towards the fork in the road.

She could see her friends in amongst the crowd gathered around the statue of Maria-sama.

Well then, let's begin.

Today's main event. Yoshino's heart was hammering in her chest.

Nonetheless, Yoshino knew that something like this wasn't going to cause her to collapse. She didn't have the same weak heart as before her surgery. Rei-chan had decided to leave Lillian's after realizing that Yoshino would be able to survive in a school without her.

(There she is!)

Yoshino nodded to herself after confirming Eriko-sama's presence. The stage had been set. It was too late to flee. And that's fine.

She spotted Rei-chan walking towards the group from the opposite direction. She didn't know why Rei-chan was returning from the school gates, but now wasn't the time to be worried about that.

Naturally, Yoshino noticed the conflicted look on Rei-chan's face. Perhaps Rei had sensed something unusual from Yoshino. No, not just Rei-chan. The Red Rose family, the White Rose sisters, the former Roses and the two photography club members, all held their breath as they watched Yoshino and Rei-chan.

Yoshino arrived at the statue of Maria-sama one step ahead of Rei-chan.

“Eriko-sama, I’m so glad that you could make it here today. Gokigenyou, Youko-sama. Thank-you for yesterday, Sei-sama.”

The first step was to greet the former Roses. The three of them returned her greetings with pleasantries and uncertain smiles.

Upon arrival at the statue of Maria-sama, Rei-chan caught sight of Eriko-sama amongst the group and rushed over, looking a little bit surprised.

“Rei-chan.”

Rei-chan looked at Yoshino.

And then got a good look at the person standing behind Yoshino.

The atmosphere was tense, like a bow drawn tight.

Finally.

“Nana-chan.”

Rei-chan called out, and smiled sweetly.

When Rei-chan called her name, Nana’s response was to take three steps forward from where she was waiting behind Yoshino and bow her head.

“Rosa Foetida, congratulations on your graduation.”

“Thank-you Nana-chan. I apologize if Yoshino dragged you along here.”

Rei-chan said, looking at her watch. While the high school had the graduation ceremony, it was classes as usual for the middle school, which meant that this was right in the middle of their lunch break.

“Not at all. I asked her to bring me here. I wanted to congratulate you personally.”

In truth, Rei-chan's speculation was right on the money, but Nana didn't want to come out and say that. Instead she acted as though she was the one who had intruded upon Yoshino.

Yesterday, Yoshino had phoned Eriko-sama from the public telephone opposite the office and asked her if she was able to meet up with them near the statue of Maria-sama after the graduation ceremony had ended. After that, she had made her way over to the middle school area and asked Nana if she was free during lunch tomorrow (ie, today).

She hadn't told either of them why.

That was why she hadn't been able to say anything. Not to Yumi-san, not to Shimako-san, and especially not to Rei-chan. Yoshino was the only one in the world who knew why this was all happening.

"Rei-chan. Watch."

Yoshino looked straight at Rei-chan. Rei-chan merely nodded. Good. As long as she was watching. Whatever else she chose to do later was fine.

"Nana."

Next she looked straight at Nana. Nana returned her gaze with nervous looking eyes. Rei-chan had been ordered to watch, but Nana was probably wondering what she was supposed to do.

Yoshino reached behind her neck with both hands. She slid her fingers under her collar, searching for the small stones joined together in a chain, and when she found it she lifted it up from around her neck.

What she pulled out was a set of dark-green stones connected to form a rosary.

She heard someone gasp.

Yoshino spread the rosary using the thumb and index fingers of both hands, and held it out in front of Nana at eye-level.

“Previously, you asked me a question. Would my petit soeur receive this rosary? Do you remember?”

– Hasekura Rei-sama’s petit soeur. Will your petit soeur receive that rosary?

“Yes.”

The path lined with ginkgo trees and the area around the statue of Maria-sama were noisy due to all the students assembled. But in Yoshino’s immediate vicinity, everything was quiet.

“I have not yet answered you. – Yes. The next owner of this rosary will be my petit soeur.”

It was so quiet Yoshino could almost hear Nana’s heart beating.

“And I think that will be you.”

She’d said it. Yoshino took a breath. She’d finally said it.

But, having just said that she couldn’t yet rest. It was insufficient to simply say that she thought Nana would be her petit soeur. After realizing this, Yoshino continued.

“Technically, I should wait until April when Nana enters high-school to ask her. However, I wanted to introduce my petit soeur to my onee-sama. So I took it upon myself to choose today. Arima Nana-san, will you be my petit soeur?”

Yoshino bowed deeply. With that, Yoshino had done everything she thought she should. All she could do now was await the judge’s decision.

Rei-chan’s gaze shifted to Nana. No, not just Rei-chan. The Red Rose family, the White Rose sisters, the former Roses and the two photography club members, all held their breath as they awaited Nana’s reply.

“I...”

Nana started to speak.

“When I first touched that rosary, I was charmed by its beauty. So much so, that I didn’t want to return it. Never before had I coveted another person’s property. Despite that, I still wanted it so very badly. That was why I asked such an impolite question.”

Where was Nana going with this speech? Yoshino didn’t know. There hadn’t even been a slight hint as to whether she was going to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’

“Then the other day, I saw that exact rosary in a store. But when I picked it up, I found that I no longer wanted it. How could that be? It was exactly the same. I thought that perhaps my tastes had changed. That I only wanted it back then. That it had been a passing fancy.”

So she would no longer accept the rosary, and wouldn’t become Yoshino’s petit soeur. That seemed to be the way the conversation was flowing.

However.

“But now, I really want that rosary.”

Nana said something completely unexpected.

“I want it so much that it hurts.... But is it okay for me to become your petit soeur for that reason.”

Nana looked at Yoshino with a serious expression, pleading for an answer. Yoshino hadn’t been expecting anything other than a yes or no answer to her question.

“Sometimes you’re too honest for your own good, Nana.”

“If I wasn’t, you’d probably get mad at me in the future for changing my story.”

“Perhaps.”

Yoshino smiled. Nana was a quick learner.

Yoshino had no idea where she would find another underclassman as useful as Nana.

She probably wouldn't find a second one.

Seriously, it was such a shame. Such a shame, but unavoidable.

Yoshino lifted up her right hand and let the rosary that she had been holding with both hands drop into the upturned palm of her left hand. Then she offered it up to Nana.

"Take this."

"Huh?"

"You don't have to become my petit soeur."

Yoshino had known from the start that Nana was enamored with the rosary. And countless times, she had thought that that was enough. Even now, she was wavering.

If she were to say, 'I wouldn't mind,' then it would still be possible for Yoshino to hang the rosary over Nana's head and make Nana her petit soeur. But that truly would be pitiable, and Yoshino's last vestiges of pride would never allow it.

There was no meaning to becoming an onee-sama, if it was due solely to the rosary. At least Yoshino thought she could look cool, while she was turning her back on Nana.

"I won't accept it."

But Nana wouldn't take it.

"Why not? You want this, right?"

"I no longer want it."

"What?"

“If I say I don’t want it, then I don’t want it.”

Like the money that is passed back and forth by two old ladies as they stand at a café cash register and argue over who is going to pay for the other, the rosary had lost track of where it was going.

“Stop!”

So Rei-chan stepped in between Yoshino and Nana and scooped up the rosary.

“Too slow.”

Rei-chan spread the rosary then called out, ‘Yumi-chan,’ looking for backup.

“Uh, yes.”

Upon hearing her name, Yumi-san flew over. Rei-chan ordered her to keep hold of Yoshino’s hands, into which she had forced the rosary.

“Leave it to me.”

Yumi-san ran behind Yoshino’s back and took hold of both the hands and the rosary.

“Let me go.”

Yoshino struggled against her, but Yumi-san held her firmly.

“Umm, Rosa Foetida, what are you doing?”

Rei-chan was holding Nana’s arms behind her back and walking her forwards. Aiming to thrust Nana’s head through the rosary’s loop.

“Ahh.”

Nana’s face was now right at the tip of Yoshino’s nose.

“Keep your feet firmly on the ground. Okay.”

Rei-chan let go of Nana. At that signal, Yumi-san too let go of Yoshino. So then, what now?

It was obvious that they were making it look as though Yoshino was going to place the rosary around Nana’s neck.

(Well....., what should I do?)

While Yoshino was still frozen to the spot from being put in such an unexpected situation, Rei-chan moved behind her and started to gently tickle her underarms.

“Wahahaha.”

As Yoshino twisted her body around, the rosary slipped from her grasp. In the next instant, it had landed around Nana’s neck.

“There, it’s done.”

“Rei-chan!”

Yoshino verbally slapped Rei-chan, saying ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ But Rei-chan merely looked calmly past Yoshino and pointed behind her.

(Behind me...?)

Yoshino turned around, and Nana was transfixed by the rosary that hung from her neck, gently stroking it.

“Why...?”

She had said that she wanted it, and that she wouldn’t accept it. But now Nana seemed to be delighted with it hanging around her neck.

“You don’t get it, Yoshino.”

“What don’t I get?”

“For Nana-chan, the rosary doesn’t have any value unless it’s a symbol that she’s your petit soeur. Isn’t that right, Nana-chan?”

Nana nodded in response to Rei-chan’s question. She seemed to be a bit reproachful as she looked at Yoshino.

“...Is that so.”

It could be. Yoshino moved over to Nana.

Rei-chan, Yumi-san, in fact probably all of her friends had surely understood Nana’s feelings. Yoshino was the only one who had interpreted Nana’s words as a blunt refusal.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t realize.”

If Rei-chan was an idiot, then so too was Yoshino.

“Back then, Nana knew that some day the rosary would be hers.”

Because it was hers, she hadn’t wanted to give it up. Looking at it this way, Yoshino was greatly relieved. Obviously they were fated to be together, right?

“And you’re fine with being soeurs?”

Sachiko-sama asked. Yoshino and Nana nodded simultaneously, at which point the rest of her companions, who had been standing a respectful distance away, gathered around and congratulated them.

Almost immediately, Nana was surrounded by Noriko-chan and Touko-chan, who greeted her by saying, ‘Let’s become good friends,’ and ‘If you have any questions, just ask.’

So that’s how it is.

By becoming Yoshino's petit soeur, Nana would be the next Rosa Foetida en bouton. Although they were in different grades, Nana would be in the same position as the two other boutons, Noriko-chan and Touko-chan.

Nana, Yoshino's own petit soeur, smiled together with Shimako-san's petit soeur and Yumi-san's petit soeur. It was a miracle, but it made Yoshino happy. She may not have got to look cool, but she was glad.

While Yoshino was quietly watching on, Rei-chan embraced her shoulders from behind.

"Yoshino."

Hey, what now. Yoshino tried to turn around, but she couldn't escape from Rei-chan's iron grip.

"I had a feeling it would turn out like this. Even so, I'm overjoyed with Nana-chan. Thank-you."

'For doing this for me,' was implied.

Well then, Rei-chan's lost item had been safely delivered.

Yoshino was pleased as she gently placed her hands over Rei-chan's, that were still embracing her shoulders.

Part 6.

In the end, Yoshino-san created a major scandal by taking the unprecedented step of giving her rosary to a student who was still in middle school.

But speaking of unprecedented acts, Yoshino-san was also the one who returned her rosary to her onee-sama, the so-called Yellow Rose Revolution, and then reconciled with her distraught onee-sama. So you could say that this was just another notch on her belt, and shouldn't have been surprising.

“Yoshino-chan.”

Eriko-sama said as she approached Yoshino-san.

“Thanks for fulfilling the promise you made to me.”

“Not at all. I wanted to show you how it’s done.”

“How it’s done? If that’s what you really wanted to say, what ever could you mean by it? I am, after all, Rei’s onee-sama. And I have been a petit soeur. Yoshino-chan, you should remember who your elders are.”

“What I remember is how much I want to never hear your nagging ever again.”

“Hmmp.”

Those two were the same as ever. Or perhaps they were both the same.

“They’re the same as ever.”

Next to Yumi, Sachiko-sama sighed in exasperation.

“Because they’re both the same.”

“...”

“What?”

Sachiko-sama asked as Yumi stared at her.

Just now, they had both been thinking the same thing. But how would her onee-sama respond if Yumi were to tell her that such a small thing had made her so happy? She would probably be even more pleased as she smiled and said, ‘Don’t be silly.’

“Ahh, That reminds me. Your grandfather came to the ceremony, onee-sama.”

“Oh, how did you know that? Did you run into him?”

“Nope. He was the person sitting next to your mother, Sayako-obasama, right?”

“Indeed he was.”

Despite Sachiko-sama’s surprise, the secret behind this trick was the fact that Sachiko-sama’s grandfather was the spitting image of her father, Tooru-ojisama. When Kashiwagi-san gets a bit older, he’d start to resemble Tooru-ojisama too, perhaps in more ways than one. In other words, he was that same type of man.

“I suppose they’ve already gone home. It’s a shame, because I was hoping to meet him.”

“I don’t know if they’ve gone home, but then I didn’t think they were going to be here today.”

“Huh?”

“My grandfather had an important meeting at work today, but he had a high fever this morning and had to take the day off. My mother was looking after him. Don’t you find it strange that they came to the graduation ceremony.”

“... I suppose so.”

In other words, her grandfather had been so desperate to see his granddaughter’s graduation ceremony that he had faked an illness and taken the day off work. Yumi felt sorry for Sachiko-sama’s father, who had been outplayed, but he had previously been guilty of skipping out on a wedding reception to watch the school athletics festival, so it probably evened out. He wouldn’t be able to complain.

“So you’re a great-grandmother now.”

Youko-sama and Eriko-sama smiled at each other. Sei-sama purposefully walked over so that she was within earshot of those two and said.

“Don’t lump me in with them. Until Nori-rin gets a petit soeur, I’m not there yet.”

“By Nori-rin, do you mean me?”

Noriko-chan joked that saying such a thing was inexcusable, however the usually sensible Noriko-chan was no match for Sei-sama and in the end had to scurry back to Shimako-san to complain.

“Well, then, I think I’ll call you Nana-chi.”

Eriko-sama had found something interesting, and looked directly at Nana-chan. Which left only Touko-chan from the group of future boutons.

“...”

She looked nervously at Youko-sama.

“Oh, Touko-chan is Touko-chan.”

” – Right.”

Touko’s face showed she was both relieved and disappointed.

That’s how it happens.

That the people at this academy are connected together, as though with chains.

Yumi’s onee-sama looked at her. Yumi looked back at her onee-sama.

Nothing needed to be said.

It’s okay, we’re connected.

– Hoohokekyo.

The call of a bush warbler came from somewhere. When Yumi heard it, she looked up at the sky.

This was Maria-sama's blue sky.

“Well then, let's get started with the photos.”

Tsutako-san's voice echoed.

The Continuing Path

“Yumi.”

It was Monday.

Yumi was called to a halt on the tree-lined path, just past the school gates.

“Ah, onee-sama.”

She stopped and turned around.

“Gokigenyou.”

Standing there, in plain clothes, was Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

Since April, Yumi had occasionally caught glimpses of her onee-sama along the tree-lined path or near the bus stop as she went to and from Lillian’s Girls University, however she still wasn’t used to it. It felt strange that her onee-sama would be wearing plain clothes while she was wearing a school uniform. On top of that, her onee-sama was wearing jeans today.

It was still quite early, so there were only a few students on their way to school. Yumi was only here at this hour because they were having a meeting about the welcoming ceremony for the new students.

“Here, this is for you.”

Sachiko-sama held out a slightly bulging white envelope.

“It’s what we talked about the other day.”

The envelope wasn’t sealed, so Yumi peeked inside.

“Ah. The photos from the trip we went on over spring break!”

“Whenever I met you, I didn’t have them with me. I knew you’d be walking by here today, so I decided to ambush you.”

“I’m humbled that you would do this for me, despite your dislike of early mornings.”

“Well, I suppose you could call it that. At any rate, there’s various counter-measures I can take, so I’m fine.”

As she said this, Sachiko-sama reached out and touched Yumi’s collar. Her fingers traced the line of the sailor collar down to the tie.

“Onee-sama?”

“I should stop. You are, after all, *Rosa Chinensis*.”

Both the person tying the tie and the one having her tie tied smiled. It was difficult to stop what had been their daily custom.

At that moment, a student came running through the school gates.

“Touko?”

“Ah, onee-sama.”

Having noticed them, Touko took a moment to adjust the pleats of her skirt before greeting Yumi with a ‘Gokigenyou.’

Touko may have thought that she had covered everything up completely, but her trademark hair rolls were still in disarray. Yumi was in no doubt that she had run all the way here from the bus stop.

“Gokigenyou, Sachiko-sama. I’ll be going on ahead of you.”

Touko gave a slight bow, then walked off in the direction of the high school buildings. There was no need to explicitly caution her about not running.

“I know she didn’t want to arrive after me, but she doesn’t have to be in such a rush.”

Yumi said as she watched Touko depart, and Sachiko-sama's eyes widened.

“My, that doesn't sound like Touko-chan.”

“Recently, she's stopped trying to shoulder everything by herself. I think it's a good trend.”

In her Yamayurikai work, her drama club activities, and her dealings with her classmates. In case of emergency, that kind of thing. But she was now able to judge when to give something her all and when to conserve her strength.

“I see.”

Smiling, Sachiko-sama gave Yumi a light nudge in the back.

“It's about time you were on your way as well.”

“Yes.”

Yumi slowly took one step forward.

Gokigenyou, Gokigenyou.

She walked slowly, with her head held high, along the tree lined path that echoed with the sound of the clear morning greeting.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here.

Yumi could no longer see her figure, but Touko would be ahead of her on this path and, if Yumi were to turn around, her onee-sama would be behind her.

In the Rose Mansion, her friends would be waiting for her arrival.

Her classmates were in their classroom, and –

When she stopped in front of the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the path, a shy voice called out to her from behind.

“Gokigenyou, Rosa Chinensis.”

Yumi turned around, smiling.

“Gokigenyou.”

Maria-sama smiled as she watched the untroubled daily lives of her lambs.

Postscript

It'd been thirty minutes since I started writing this postscript and not a single sentence had come out, so I thought this was hopeless and decided to start by typing my current situation in to my computer (good, that's two lines). At any rate, if I were to leave this blank, so that the afterword was only a white sheet of paper, it would be a huge mistake and there would have to be a note attached to it when it's distributed as a book.

That doesn't mean I have nothing to write about. Quite the opposite. It's just that I can't find the right way to output what's inside my head. For instance, say you're not in the mood for singing today, but then you get swept up in an easy to follow rhythm with a great intro and, despite what you said, you start singing along, which gradually increases until you're singing with wild abandon. Let's see if I can start something like that. I'm half expecting that, but at any rate it should help me think about what to write.

So the sentences I'm writing now are what you'd call 'pump priming.'

And if the water doesn't come gushing out, the sentences I'm currently writing will be deleted.

Hello, this is Konno.

Someone whose grumblings have just lost them the sympathy of all the people who usually start by reading the postscript first. Objectively, that's how it feels. Sorry for the bother.

This happened some time ago, when I was reading a monthly magazine.

What I had supposed was the serialization of a new novel turned out to be an author's essay. The bear's novel, upon reading, painted a picture of every

day life completely unrelated to the title. And after that edition was finished, it continued in the next in the same manner. I don't remember how long it continued for, but it was interesting so I looked forward to reading it every time. But, at some point, it suddenly turned into a novel. It seems the essays were being run only until the author started the story. The story that had started, while interesting, wasn't something that I read every issue. Perhaps the essays were included in some magazine that specializes in lectures. It nags at me (and someday soon I should find out).

So, on one hand, while I said I had something to write about, this could be seen as a warm-up while I'm stuck for words. So reading this far, perhaps all the people who can remember the story's title and the author's face can join together.

Still, it's a problem if you get buried underneath the pages that were only written as a warm-up, so I think I should write about those 'things I have to write about.'

I touched upon this in a previous postscript, but with Sachiko's graduation, the tale of "Maria-sama ga miteru's" Sachiko and Yumi has come to an end.

In Yumi's time, it's been a year and a half. In my time, it's been 10 years and 8 months. Some 34 volumes. With the anime book, and the illustrations book, 36! (Together?)

No matter how I look at it, it is pretty incredible. As for the series, before I knew it (long ago) it had turned into a "shrine of dreams."

This volume's subtitle is 'Hello, Goodbye.'

The first candidates were "Gokigenyou Gokigenyou / Hello Goodbye" or "Hello Goodbye / Gokigenyou Gokigenyou." However, the subtitles are written in a small script so any subscript would be barely legible. And it'd

be impossible on the spine of the book. So I settled on “Hello Goodbye” without any subscript.

It’s written about in the introduction, but ‘Gokigenyou’ is a phrase that can have various meanings, such as ‘Good morning,’ ‘Hello,’ ‘Good evening,’ ‘Are you okay?’ and ‘Goodbye.’ From time to time, when I have autograph sessions, the exchanged greeting is ‘Gokigenyou.’ And of course, ‘Gokigenyou’ is ‘Go-kigen-you’ (where ‘go’ is an honorific, ‘kigen’ is the kanji for body and ‘you’ is the conjunctive form of ‘yoi’, which means good), so it can be used to convey concern for the other person, as in, ‘I do hope you’re taking care of yourself.’ So, in other words, the feeling of ‘Gokigenyou’ is implied in ‘Hello, Goodbye.’

As I was nearing the end of this novel, the characters from ‘Maria-sama ga Miteru’ started to appear frequently in my dreams. Because it was a dream I could hardly remember any of it when I awoke, but one of the things I did remember was a trip to an onsen with both the old and new Yamayurikai members. Everyone was wearing a light cotton kimono at a traditional Japanese inn. As for what I was doing, I was writing about it as it happened. Emotionally, it was more like, ‘I can’t escape from the manuscript even in my dreams,’ than, ‘I can’t get enough of this.’ (Teeheehee). Still, I found it a bit strange. Because there was such a huge gap between the traditional inn and the scene I had finished writing before I went to bed (the graduation ceremony). I noticed it, and the characters noticed it too.

“Hey... is this kind of scene really necessary?”

My memory’s a bit hazy, but I think it was Eriko who said that.

Why would I dream such a scene? After all, I didn’t particularly want to go to an onsen myself.

Upon reflection, I think I wanted the characters to have a chance to relax.

Whether it’s been a year and a half, or ten years and eight months, I wanted to show my appreciation to those darling girls who have run alongside me the entire time, but in reality there’s nothing I can do. So at least in my dreams, I’ll take them to an onsen as a way of showing my appreciation.

I appreciate your efforts. Take a leisurely bath and relax your mind and body. I'll get you a nice dinner, too.

So, while I'm taking a break from 'Maria-sama ga Miteru,' I'm not finished with this world. The shape may have changed, but some parts should be recognizable and, if I feel so inclined, I may return to tales of Lillian's Girls Academy.

Gokigenyou.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ The italics are used to represent words that were puns on the class name in the original Japanese. Chrysanthemum doesn't really lend itself to puns in English.
2. ↑ This is supposed to be a nonsense word derived from princess.
3. ↑ The pronunciation for the two sentences is identical in Japanese.
4. ↑ The words for 'farewell address' and 'cleaning' are pronounced the same in Japanese. I couldn't come up with an English equivalent, so have just used whichever the speaker intends, but with the word italicized.
5. ↑ Again, words that sound the same as 'formal reply' have been italicized.
6. ↑ https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Aogeba_t%C5%8Dtos_hi
7. ↑ This is an expression of gratitude usually said after meals.
8. ↑ And this is usually said before meals.